

University of Stirling

The mediating of *chanson*:
French identity and the myth
Brel-Brassens-Ferré

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Submitted for the degree of

PhD in French Studies

School of Languages, Cultures and Religion

September 2008

Abstract of thesis

The mediating of *chanson*: French identity and the myth Brel-Brassens-Ferré

Jacques Brel, Georges Brassens and Léo Ferré are three emblematic figures of post-war French song, who have been seen by critics, journalists, and the public, as the epitome of *chanson*, and more generally of 'Frenchness'. The starting point of this study is the observation that the legacy of the systematic association of Brel, Brassens, and Ferré – crystallised in Cristiani's 1969 interview and in Jean-Pierre Leloir's photograph of the interview – has enjoyed a prosperity which seems disproportionate to the actual relevance of the comparison between the three artists. In 1969, the three singers were significant figures of French song, but they were not the only ones. Bringing them together was therefore a promise of media success, but it was in no way expected to start a legend; and yet, the myth of the interview has today taken over its reality, to the extent that the Comédie Française is presently, almost thirty years later, turning it into a play which was staged in May 2008. The photograph of the three singers smoking and drinking around a table is, today, and for a vast majority of people, the only thing that they know about the famous interview, if not about the singers.

The lack of obvious grounds to justify the exclusivity of the trio suggests that there is more to it than a musical trinity. By taking into consideration the oral dimension of song, the socio-cultural context in which the trio emerged, and the mediation of their celebrity, this study aims to identify the factors of cultural and national identity that have held together the myth of the trio since its creation. Besides shedding new light on the significance of the three artists individually, this study proposes to demonstrate that each singer embodies qualities with which the French people likes to be associated, and that the trio Brel-Brassens-Ferré can therefore be seen as an arbitrary sketch of a certain 'Frenchness'. In particular, this thesis focuses on the trio illustrating the popular representation of a key issue of French national identity: the paradoxical aspiration to both revolution and the status quo.

By taking the cultural icon 'Brel-Brassens-Ferré' as a case study through which to address questions of popular and national identity, this study contributes to cultural studies in two different ways. Firstly, through theorising the implications of the oral dimension of songs, it demonstrates the necessity of taking into consideration factors such as performance, the media, and the socio-historical context, when studying artists as societal phenomena. Secondly, it evidences the importance of the study of forms of popular culture, such as iconic singers or music, when investigating the ways in which a society perceives its own national identity.

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Acknowledgements:

First, I would like to thank the supervisors of this thesis who have supported me throughout the different stages of the project: Alastair Duncan guided me during the first year of my research, Bill Kidd's insight on post-war French society has been very inspiring, Claire Boyle helped me keep focused while I was writing the thesis and, finally, David Murphy guided me and encouraged me throughout the final stages and dedicated a lot of time to reading and rereading many versions of this thesis.

My thanks also go to the Arts and Humanities Research Council for granting me a postgraduate postdoctoral award, to the School of Languages Cultures and Religion of the University of Stirling for awarding me, for two consecutive years, a postgraduate bursary, and to the Funds for Women Graduates, for the award of a Foundation Main Grant. These have enabled me to concentrate fully on my research and to complete the thesis within the time limit.

I would also like to express my thanks to all my colleagues from the School of Languages Cultures and Religion at the University of Stirling, and to all my friends and family who have supported me and encouraged me throughout this project. In particular, I thank my friends Mathilde, Nathalie, and Alison, my sisters Valérie, Ana, and Vanessa; I am particularly grateful to the latter for having assisted me in my research at the Pompidou centre on a number of occasions. Finally, I would like to express special thanks to my parents, Marc and Florence, who have supported me in many ways throughout years of studies, and to my husband, David, who has proofread every page of this thesis and whose encouragements have proved an invaluable support.

Introduction

Jacques Brel (1929-1978), Georges Brassens (1921-1981) and Léo Ferré (1916-1993) are three emblematic figures of post-war French song. The evocation of these three names is almost sufficient to define the specifically French genre which is the *chanson*. David Looseley describes them as serving as ‘a benchmark [...] against which other French artists must be measured and measure themselves’.¹ And, the benchmark remains valid today. Many singer-songwriters of the twenty-first century, such as Bénabar, Delerm or Calogero for example, claim to draw their inspiration from Brel, Brassens and Ferré, and the media never fail to look for traces of the trio’s legacy in the work of emerging artists. The three singers became an exemplary trio of French *chanson*, and this trio was immortalised in the famous interview by François-René Cristiani on 6 January 1969, and in Jean-Pierre Leloir’s photographs of the same interview.² The starting point for this study is the observation that the systematic association of Brel, Brassens, and Ferré has enjoyed a currency which seems disproportionate to the actual relevance of the comparison between the three artists. In 1969, the three singers were significant figures of French song, but they were not the only ones. Bringing them together was therefore a promise of media success, since it was certain to reach a large audience, but it was in no way expected to start a legend; and yet, the myth of the interview has today taken over its reality, to the extent that the Comédie Française, almost thirty years later, turned it into a play which was staged in May 2008. The photograph of the three singers smoking and drinking around a table is,

¹ Looseley, *Popular Music in Contemporary France* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2003), p.68.

² The interview, which was recorded on 6 January 1969, was broadcast on RTL a few days later. The photographs taken that day as well as a transcription of the entire interview can be found in: François-René Cristiani and Jean-Pierre Leloir, *Trois hommes dans un salon: Brel Brassens Ferré* (Paris: Fayard/Éditions du Verbe (chorus), 2003).

today, and for a vast majority of people, the only thing that they know about the famous interview, if not about the singers.

One can legitimately ask what exactly brought the three men together in people's minds: the origin of their systematic association is to be found in exterior, cultural circumstances, because even if they were on friendly terms, the singers rarely saw each other and their careers developed independently of one another. Moreover, having been contemporaries of artists like Gainsbourg, Ferrat, or Barbara, to name but three, Brel, Brassens and Ferré were not the only iconic characters of French *chanson* of their time; and yet, since the 1950s, when they became famous, critics, the media, and even the public have constantly compared or associated these three singer-songwriters. If, therefore, the trio Brel-Brassens-Ferré is arbitrary and is the result of a conjunction of cultural and historical circumstances, its deconstruction, by revealing the nature of these circumstances as well as their interaction, should elucidate a general process of mythicisation to which it bears witness.

The question underpinning this study is therefore the following one: 'where does the significance of this trio lie?' They have been called the 'trinity' of *chanson*,³ or a 'triumvirate' representing 'the *summum* of French *chanson*';⁴ but the lack of obvious grounds to justify the exclusivity of the trio suggests that there is more to it than a musical trinity. By taking into consideration the oral dimension of song, the socio-cultural context in which the trio emerged, and the mediation of their celebrity, this study aims to identify the factors of cultural and national identity that have held together the myth of the trio since its creation. The main argument will be that the extraordinary prosperity of the association of Brel, Brassens, and Ferré is not actually to be found in

³ Looseley, *Popular Music in Contemporary France*, p.68.

⁴ Sara Poole, *Brel and Chansons: a Critical Appreciation* (Dallas, Lanham, Boulder, New York and Oxford: University Press of America, 2004), p.xv.

the significance of the trio itself, but rather in the significance that the public, largely via the media, saw in it and gained from seeing in it.

Although Brel, Brassens, and Ferré have been the subject of several studies, they have not been seriously studied as a trio and in context: they have been located in longitudinal histories of song and of literature, but not studied as a social phenomenon. Chris Tinker has rightly remarked of Brel and Brassens that their critics have tended to focus either on the lives of the singers or on the analysis of their lyrics and themes,⁵ which might also be said about Ferré. Interestingly, many of Brel and Brassens' French biographers appear to have been either journalists, or friends and relatives of their subjects. While this reveals the level of public interest in the private lives of the singers, it also testifies to a lack of French academic interest in them. Brel's partner, Maddly Bamy, wrote two books in which she recalls thoughts that Brel used to have and ideas he used to express;⁶ Brel's daughter, France, and his brother, Pierre, both wrote books about him.⁷ Among Brassens' biographers, Bonnafé was his schoolteacher,⁸ Fallet, Battista, Larue and Lamy were his friends.⁹ Among the most serious and useful biographies, journalist Louis-Jean Calvet wrote very detailed accounts of the lives and works of both Brassens and Ferré,¹⁰ and Berruer did the same for Brassens and Brel.¹¹

⁵ Tinker, pp.2-3.

⁶ Maddly Bamy, *Tu leur diras* (Seyssinet – Paris: Éd. du Grésivaudan, 1981) and *Pour le jour qui revient* (Éditions Yva Peyret, Corcettes-le-Forat Suisse, 1988 then 1996).

⁷ France Brel et Andrée Salée, *Brel* (Paris: Éditions Solar, 1988); Pierre Brel, *Jacques Brel, mon grand petit frère* (Bruxelles: Éditions collection livres, 1998).

⁸ Alphonse Bonnafé, *Georges Brassens – l'anar... bon enfant* (Paris: Seghers, 1963/1988).

⁹ René Fallet, *Brassens* (Paris: Denoël, 1967); André Larue, *Brassens ou la mauvaise herbe* (Paris: Fayard, 1970); Eric Battista, *Georges Brassens* (Seysinet-Parisset (38): Grésivaudan, 1987); Jean-Claude Lamy, *Brassens le mécréant de Dieu* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2004).

¹⁰ Louis-Jean Calvet, *Léo Ferré*; Jean-Louis Calvet, *Georges Brassens* (Paris: Lieu Commun, 1991).

¹¹ Pierre Berruer, *Georges Brassens: la marguerite et le chrysanthème* (Paris: Presses de la Cité, 1981); Berruer, Pierre, *Jacques Brel va bien, il dort aux Marquises* (Paris: Presses de la Cité, 1983).

Journalists from abroad were also interested in Brel, as the biography of Alan Clayson testifies.¹²

Monographs about Brel have analysed his career and his personal life, as well as the links between his songs and his charismatic character. Olivier Todd's biography succeeds very well in underlining the complexity of a man whose generosity, paradoxically, was equalled only by his individualism. In particular, Todd's reflection on Brel's paradoxical attitude towards celebrity – the singer being simultaneously an example of sincerity and an 'artiste de l'interview'¹³ – provides a very interesting introductory approach to the notion of the manipulation of artists' public profiles; but Todd's aim being to write a biography, the approach is not developed any further. More critical approaches focused on Brel's work rather than on his life are also of interest, such as Patrick Baton's original stylistic study or Sara Poole's thematic study of Brel's songs.¹⁴ The poetic dimensions of Brel's work have also been examined by Jean Clouzet, in his edition of Brel's songs in the collection *Poètes d'Aujourd'hui*.¹⁵

The relation between song and poetry is also a recurrent theme in studies of Brassens' work. His vocabulary and the medieval inspiration of his songs have been the subject of several books.¹⁶ Many monographs – including biographies – have used one of Brassens' most recurrent qualifiers (poet; anarchist; anticlerical) as the main thread of their studies; Marc Wilmet, for example, chose to develop the anti-authoritarian side

¹² Alan Clayson, *Jacques Brel – The Biography* (Chessington, Surrey: Castle Communications, 1996).

¹³ Olivier Todd, *Jacques Brel: une vie* (Paris: Laffont, 1984), p.183.

¹⁴ Patrick Baton, *Jacques Brel, une œuvre* (Bruxelles: Éditions Labor, 1990); Sara Poole, *Brel and Chanson: a Critical Appreciation* (Dallas, Lanham, Boulder, New York and Oxford: University Press of America, 2004).

¹⁵ Jean Clouzet, *Jacques Brel*, (Paris: Seghers, coll. Poètes d'aujourd'hui, 1964).

¹⁶ See for example: Linda Hantrais, *Le Vocabulaire de Georges Brassens* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1976, 2 vols); J-P. Sermonet, *Brassens: le prince et le croque-note* (Paris: Éditions du rocher, 1988); L. Rochard, *Brassens: orfèvre des mots* (Pont-Scorff (56): "Imprim'art", 1996); Fabrice Venturini, *Georges Brassens ou la parole distanciée* (Saint Genouph : Nizet, coll. Chanteurs-poètes, 1996); François-Victor Rudent, *Georges Brassens sur les pas de François Villon* (Pont-Scorff : Arthemus, 1997).

of Brassens in *Georges Brassens Libertaire*,¹⁷ while Jean-Claude Lamy analysed the singer's attitude to God and religion in *Brassens le mécréant de Dieu*.¹⁸ Non-French commentators, especially in the United Kingdom, have also contributed to widening the scope of 'Brassens studies' and have strengthened academic interest in the singer; Sara Poole's *Brassens* is the latest such study entirely dedicated to Brassens,¹⁹ whereas Christopher Pinet's article 'The image of the French in the songs of Georges Brassens',²⁰ for example, was one of the first attempts at presenting Brassens' success as a social paradox.

Even a cursory inspection of the numerous titles devoted to Ferré suggests the difficulty critics have had in comprehending his work as a whole. Studies have focused either on the character that is 'Léo Ferré', as the many biographies and the publication of interviews with and by his friends testify, or they have carried out more traditional poetic analyses of his songs. The classic biography of Ferré was written by a *Le Monde* journalist, Robert Belleret;²¹ in the significant volume, *Léo Ferré: une vie d'artiste*, Belleret draws a very complete portrait of Ferré, with many references to testimonies of friends and relatives, and with many allusions to the parallels existing between situations described in his songs and real-life situations. Other more traditional biographies include journalists Jacques Vassal's and Claude Fléouter's studies,²² while the thematically organised compilation of radio interviews, *Vous savez qui je suis maintenant?*,²³ aims at revealing Léo Ferré through his own words. Studies of Ferré's work properly speaking are more limited, although Christiane Letellier's analysis of his

¹⁷ Marc Wilmet, *Georges Brassens Libertaire* (Bruxelles : Les Éperonniers, 1991).

¹⁸ Jean-Claude Lamy, *Brassens le mécréant de Dieu* (Paris : Albin Michel, 2004).

¹⁹ Sara Poole, *Brassens: Chansons* (London: Grant & Cutler, 2000).

²⁰ Christopher Pinet, 'The image of the French in the songs of Georges Brassens', *Contemporary French Civilization*, vol.VI, 1-2 (Fall-Winter 1981), pp.271-94.

²¹ Robert Belleret, *Léo Ferré: une vie d'artiste* ([Paris]: Actes Sud, 1996).

²² Claude Fléouter, *Léo* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1996); Jacques Vassal, *Léo Ferré: l'enfant millénaire* (Tours: Les Éditions Hors Collection, 2003).

²³ Quentin Dupont, *Léo Ferré: Vous savez qui je suis, maintenant?* (Monaco: La mémoire et la mer, 2003)

songs provides a very useful critical approach.²⁴ Few studies have focused on the complex interaction existing between the character 'Ferré' and his work; the main ones are actually found in the collective volumes *Léo Ferré: cahiers d'études*, published by the Éditions du Petit Véhicule. It is interesting to note, though, that Ferré's work has been studied less controversially than Brel and Brassens's as pure poetry, and Peter Hawkins' article 'Léo Ferré: Modernism, Postmodernism and the Avant-Garde in Popular *Chanson*',²⁵ clearly uses the traditional terminology of poetry to analyse Ferré's work.

Brel, Brassens and Ferré have also been the subjects of more general approaches; notably they have been studied from the perspective of music and literary history. Lucienne Cantaloube-Ferrieu, in *Chanson et Poésie des années 30 aux années 60*,²⁶ has looked at how several singers, among them Brassens and Ferré, fit in with French literary tradition. She has analysed, for instance, how the notions of romanticism and of the fantastic have transferred from Romance to Song. The three singers have also been used as key examples to underpin arguments developed in general studies about French popular song: Brel, Brassens and Ferré are each the subject of a full chapter in Peter Hawkins' *Chanson: The French Singer-Songwriter from Aristide Bruant to the Present Day*.²⁷ In his monograph, Hawkins characterises the personas of singer-songwriters in an attempt to show how each of them embodies an aspect of national popular heritage. Hawkins' work therefore paves the way for a problematisation of the mythicisation of singers, but it deals with the artists individually rather than in relation

²⁴ Christiane Letellier, *Léo Ferré: l'unique et sa solitude* (Paris: Nizet, 1994).

²⁵ Peter Hawkins 'Léo Ferré: Modernism, Postmodernism and the Avant-Garde in Popular *Chanson*' in 'Popular Music in France', *French Cultural Studies*, v.16, 2, June 2005, pp.169-178.

²⁶ Lucienne Cantaloube-Ferrieu, *Chanson et Poésie des années 30 aux années 60: Trenet, Brassens, Ferré... ou les 'enfants naturels' du surréalisme* (Paris: Nizet, 1981).

²⁷ Peter Hawkins, *Chanson: The French Singer-Songwriter from Aristide Bruant to the Present Day* (Aldershot and Burlington, USA: Ashgate, 2000).

to one another. Hawkins also analyses the relationship between singers, songs and audiences, but each analysis is a discrete element and remains a closed circuit.

In his study *Georges Brassens and Jacques Brel: Personal and Social Narratives in Post-War chanson*, Chris Tinker goes beyond biography or mere lyric-analysis by taking into account the music and what he calls the ‘personal and social narratives’. He draws attention to the persona of the artist and to the importance and the difficulty of differentiating between the ‘implied author’ and the ‘real author’.²⁸ However, once again, although the focus is on the *relationship* between singer and song, this relationship is not problematised clearly in relation to the socio-cultural context. The relationships between singer, song and audience have been the objects of several studies: Peter Hawkins and Chris Tinker’s works have already been mentioned, but David Looseley, and Hugh Dauncey and Steve Cannon’s books testify to a similar interest in the interaction between the genre *chanson*, artists, and audiences.²⁹ Looseley, for example, examines the different styles of popular music that have shaped twentieth century France, and thereby provides a valuable understanding of the specific status of singer-songwriters and of the *chanson* genre in relation to other musical genres. Dauncey and Cannon’s book contains a series of enlightening chapters dealing with various aspects of popular music and the music industry, such as the question of cultural legitimacy, the role of the media, and the potential political impact of songs; it therefore provides a useful contextualisation of the *chanson* genre. However, although the relationships and interactions existing between *chanson*, singers, and the audience have been the subjects of many studies, they have been given little attention as social phenomena; critics have analysed the mythical dimension of artists like Brel, Brassens

²⁸ Chris Tinker, *Georges Brassens and Jacques Brel: Personal and Social Narratives in Post-War Chanson*, p.4.

²⁹ David L. Looseley, *Popular Music in Contemporary France* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2003); Hugh Dauncey and Steve Cannon, eds., *Popular Music in France from Chanson to Techno* (London and New York: Ashgate, 2003).

or Ferré, they have pointed out the significance of *chanson* to French national identity, but they have not analysed the social significance of the popularity of the trio Brel-Brassens-Ferré. What this thesis intends to do, is to combine a sociological approach to the trio with an analysis of the lyrics and of the singers' personalities.

Dimitris Papanikolaou's recent monograph is the first in-depth analysis of the interaction between the cultural circumstances of the 1950s and the rise to celebrity of charismatic poet-singer-songwriters of the same period. Papanikolaou explores the political, ideological and economic context of post-war France, insisting on the importance of the popularity of socialist ideologies, on the utopia of a Social Republic which stimulated the promotion of a more democratic culture, and on the emergence of an anti-commercial subversive genre.³⁰ He analyses, in context, the celebrity of the most iconic singer-songwriters of the period – including Brel, Brassens and Ferré – highlighting the social significance of their celebrity. In contrast to previous studies, Papanikolaou's study does take into account the complementarity of artists, and although his thesis offers no formal interpretation of the systematic association of Brel, Brassens and Ferré, it does argue that Brel, for example, was a fundamental figure of *chanson* because he brought into the genre some personal qualities from which his fellow singer-songwriters benefited as a result. In particular, Papanikolaou argues that Brel's stage performances widened the scope of poetry: 'with Brel's performance, the scrutiny normally expected from poetry readers is discouraged: poetry has become a general atmosphere'.³¹

Papanikolaou's deconstruction of the Brassens myth is particularly thorough and effective. He does not challenge the fact that Brassens has been unanimously thought to

³⁰ Dimitris Papanikolaou, *Singing Poets: Literature and Popular Music in France and Greece* (London: Legenda, 2007).

³¹ Papanikolaou, p.46.

represent an ‘intangible French quintessence’ – to use Sara Poole’s phrase –³² but instead of insisting on what made him so mythical, Papanikolaou reveals what made the singer’s success so obvious and inevitable. Indeed, his study explains that from the beginning of his career, Brassens epitomised a ‘utopian “reconciled” view of society that fits beautifully with the requirements of the culture industry’.³³ Papanikolaou methodically debunks the myth of Brassens by gradually presenting all the elements (including, of course, Brassens’ talent) which made his celebrity a circumstantial accident.

Papanikolaou’s approach to the singer-songwriters is therefore an external one: he uses external circumstances to give a new perspective to the artists’ prestige and in particular to deconstruct the myth of Brassens. This thesis proposes to take this deconstruction further by revealing the mechanisms contributing to the myth of the *trio* Brel-Brassens-Ferré, and to use that myth as a case study to provide a better understanding of the society that has constructed it.

In the famous 1969 interview mentioned above, journalist François-René Cristiani asked Brel, Brassens, and Ferré the following question: ‘êtes-vous conscient du fait que vous êtes, tous les trois, les trois plus grands poètes, les trois plus grands auteurs-compositeurs-interprètes de la chanson française, cela depuis des années, et avec le même succès?’³⁴ *La chanson française* is probably the most particular feature of the French popular musical tradition. Scholars who study the subject hardly ever try to translate the term when they write in English, therefore reinforcing the idea that *la chanson* is a typically French phenomenon that has no equivalent in the English-speaking world. Calling the three singers ‘*les plus grands de la chanson française*’,

³² Poole, p.9.

³³ Papanikolaou, p.32.

³⁴ Cristiani and Leloir, p.14.

therefore, suggests that Brel, Brassens, and Ferré not only embody ideal French *chanson*, but also the idea of ‘the typically French’, of ‘Frenchness’. By understanding what cultural elements are at stake in the arbitrary, artificial but nevertheless undeniable association of the three singer-songwriters, this study hopes to demonstrate that the trio can be considered as a popular interpretation of the cultural debates of the post-war period, and that it is, more generally, a popular myth of ‘Frenchness’.

The first chapter of this thesis focuses on the systematic association of Brel, Brassens, and Ferré, and on the origins of the myth of the trio. Drawing on studies of the three singers and on newspaper articles, the chapter argues that the three singers are emblematic figures of the 1950s and 1960s, and that they epitomise, through their lives and their work, the ideologies and the imagery of post-war *chanson* and, to a certain extent, of post-war cultural movements. Chapter One also argues that Jean-Pierre Leloir’s photograph of the three singers greatly contributed to the ‘mythicisation’ of the trio by providing the public with a tangible symbolic image of ‘*grande*’ *chanson* and more generally of ‘*Frenchness*’. In order to better understand the functioning of the trio as a societal myth, the first chapter therefore proposes to analyse the trio as a myth according to the definition given by Roland Barthes in *Mythologies*. Barthes’s theories, among other things, highlight the necessity, when deciphering a myth, of taking into account the *intentional* dimension of the phenomenon; in other words, according to Barthes’ theories, if the trio Brel-Brassens-Ferré represents Frenchness, it is because the concept of Frenchness has been *intentionally* associated with it by society.

It is this intentionality that Chapters Two and Three endeavour to explore. Chapter Two analyses the ways in which song, by nature, is a genre which offers many points of contact between the performer and the public, and which is therefore particularly permeable to the influence – or the *intention* – of society. Chapter Three

focuses on the media profiles of the three singers, underlying the aspects of their work, their personae, and their lives that have been recuperated, enhanced, and manipulated by the media and society to contribute to the creation of the myth. Chapter Four then examines the concepts and ideals of Frenchness that have been attached to the myth Brel-Brassens-Ferré through the permeability of their art and of their public profiles.

Chapter Two focuses on how song, by its very nature, implies a physical and cultural connection between a performer and his/her audience. Although the part played by the three singers' characters in their celebrity has been repeatedly highlighted by critics and journalists, less attention has been paid to the nature of the relationship between performer and audience which their character implied. Drawing partly on Roland Barthes' theory of 'Le grain de la voix',³⁵ and more substantially on Paul Zumthor's definition of oral poetry,³⁶ the first part of the chapter leaves music and lyrics aside to focus primarily on what is specific to an oral genre: direct and physical contact between performer and audience. Zumthor being a medievalist, his interest is principally in the social function of oral genres and in the specific values traditionally attributed to the human voice. Approaching songs with the insight of his theories therefore provides a different and useful perspective on the elements at stake in the connection established between an artist and an audience during a performance. This analysis is complemented by more recent and more musically orientated theories of the rites of performance developed by Simon Frith.³⁷ Although Frith's theories do comment on the intrinsically oral nature of song, his interest lies more in the impact which the phenomenon – embodied in rock music – has had on the society of the second half of

³⁵ Roland Barthes, 'Le grain de la voix', in *Musique en jeu*, vol.9.

³⁶ Paul Zumthor, *Introduction à la poésie orale* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil Collection poétique, 1983).

³⁷ Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998).

the twentieth century. His theories will then provide a transition with the second approach to be developed in the second chapter of this thesis: a study of the socioeconomic context.

The second part of the chapter looks at how the socioeconomic context of the 1950s and 1960s influenced the reception of songs by the public. In other words, it investigates the ways in which phenomena like the baby-boom, the evolution of moral and social values, the post-war context, the beginning of globalisation, and the development of the music industry, acted as a form of mediation between the public, and artists and their works. This approach examines the social connotations of song in relation to other forms of cultural capital as defined by Pierre Bourdieu in *La Distinction*. Although Bourdieu's hierarchical classification of the arts might be dated today, his study is based on surveys of the population in the 1960s and therefore provides a valuable insight into the status of song at the time. Another focus of this second part of the chapter is the social context in the 1950s and 1960s. Drawing on Frith's analysis of the social rites associated with rock music,³⁸ and on Edgar Morin's analysis of the impact of rock on French teenagers,³⁹ particular attention is given to the context in which rock music developed in France, and to the ways in which it influenced the reception of more traditional *chanson*. Finally, the implications of the economic situation are taken into account, notably the new demands imposed by the newly emerged music industry. Following David Marshall's theories of celebrity and power,⁴⁰ the media requirements imposed on singers, until then used to playing anonymously in cabarets, will be particularly highlighted.

³⁸ Frith, *Performing Rites*.

³⁹ 'Salut les Copains', Edgar Morin, *Le Monde*, 06.07.63 and 07.07.63.

⁴⁰ P. David Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

Chapter Three then focuses on the medium through which Brel, Brassens and Ferré became a ‘mythical’ trio to the public: the media. It analyses, with the insight of the previous chapter, the different elements involved in Brel, Brassens, and Ferré becoming a media phenomenon. The chapter, mainly based on the study of newspaper articles and of audiovisual archives, draws the public profiles of the singers, insisting on their media representation and their handling of celebrity. It also offers an analysis of the singers’ audience, based on surveys and testimonies, as well as on the ‘typical’ audience as implied by the lyrics of the songs. Such a study of the media appeal of the singers enables us to draw a more precise picture of the aspects of their characters and of their work that might have found an echo in post-war society.

The chapter notably insists on the complementarity of the three singers. It identifies common points between the artists, such as their fervent individualism, their taste for revolt, and their inherently poetic – even romantic – personae. It also observes, however, that such qualities and ideals are expressed very differently by Brel, Brassens, and Ferré, and that how they express and represent these ideals is an important factor in the way in which they are interpreted by the public. The three singers, then, represent three different attitudes towards the same ideals. The question which the conclusion of this chapter raises, and which Chapter Four examines in detail, is whether the singers’ different attitudes towards ideals traditionally associated with French identity encapsulate the ambiguity of the French attitude towards national identity, and whether the association of Brel, Brassens and Ferré is, therefore, an arbitrary sketch of a certain ‘Frenchness’.

Finally, Chapter Four examines the trio Brel-Brassens-Ferré in relation to the concept of Frenchness. Its aim is not to demonstrate that the trio actually embodies

'Frenchness', but rather to argue that it embodies a popular interpretation of Frenchness. The previous chapters insist on the importance of the part played by subjectivity in the public's interpretation of the trio, and Chapter Four establishes a link between what the singers actually say and stand for through their songs and interviews, and the concepts, ideas, and ideals that the public perceived or projected in them through its subjectivity. The chapter starts by identifying the mechanism of the singers' success, through the analysis of the ways in which the artists and the public have played on the dichotomy existing between the singers themselves and their personae. It is then argued that this duality of the artist, which has undeniably played a significant part in the celebrity of the three singers, represents an ideal medium through which to express a key issue of French national identity: the paradoxical aspiration to both revolution and status quo.

In order to better explain how the trio can be interpreted as a tangible representation of post-war debates over cultural identity, the chapter also provides analysis of such debates. Drawing on studies of French cultural identity since the dawn of the modern era, the chapter observes that one of the most specific aspects of French identity has been to simultaneously aspire to modernity and refuse this modernity in the name of a more 'authentic' and glorious cultural past. It is then argued that the trio, because of the dual dimension of the artists that form it and because the ideas and ideologies that it articulates move between three poles (Brel, Brassens, and Ferré), represents a triangle within which French cultural identity can evolve.

The second part of the chapter focuses on the work of the singers in order to demonstrate how the main cultural debates of the post-war period found an echo in the trio Brel-Brassens-Ferré. In particular, it investigates the representation, in the singers' work and public profiles, of the debates over memory, over the redefinition of class and

gender relationships, and over the cultural ‘authenticity’ of France in an increasingly Americanised context.

This thesis, then, approaches the trio Brel-Brassens-Ferré from a variety of perspectives. It starts by adopting a sociological approach to the ‘myth’ by examining the socio-cultural factors involved in the mythicisation of the trio. Building on this sociological approach, the analysis then turns towards the implications of oral performance in order to define precisely how society *managed* to manipulate and appropriate the singers. The study of oral performance is followed by an analysis of the media significance and the signification of the singers, which completes the mythical picture of the trio. Finally, the myth Brel-Brassens-Ferré is confronted with its signification – typical French *chanson* or the idea of ‘Frenchness’ – and confirmation of this signification is sought in a thematic analysis of the singers’ lyrics.

Chapter 1: An artificial Trio

This introductory chapter aims to locate the study of the trio Brel-Brassens-Ferré in the cultural field, notably in relation to French song and post-war cultural movements, and to explain the reasons why examining this popular ‘myth’ can provide a useful line of enquiry through which to analyse the representation of national identity in the post-war French context. The present chapter intends to demonstrate that despite the many similarities that exist between the works of the three singers, and although they are undeniably emblematic of the cultural context of the 1950s and 1960s, the lives and work of Brel, Brassens, and Ferré cannot alone explain the mythicisation of the trio. What will be argued below, then, is that in order to appreciate the full significance of the myth Brel-Brassens-Ferré, and to understand why this myth is still very much alive today, it is important to adopt a diverse and multi-pronged approach to the trio, centred around sociological theories, rather than simply adopting approaches that would focus uniquely on literary, musical, or historical issues. Emphasis will particularly be placed on Roland Barthes’ semiotic approach to societal ‘myths’, in an attempt to shed light on the socio-cultural framework around which the myth Brel-Brassens-Ferré crystallised. This first chapter, then, will shed light on the key cultural fields involved in the mythicisation of the trio, and will therefore determine the variety of approaches that have to be adopted in order to fully investigate the myth Brel-Brassens-Ferré.

A – Brel, Brassens and Ferré: the creation of a trio

1) Origins and grounds for the trio

The combining of the names of Brel, Brassens and Ferré into a trio was a gradual process. A study of the occurrences of the association of their names in the press suggests that although comparisons between the three singers were made during the 1950s, systematic references to the three names together started in the years 1963-1964, and became increasingly frequent thereafter until the trio was finally crystallised in the famous interview conducted by François-René Cristiani, in January 1969, and in Jean-Pierre Leloir's photographs of this interview.¹ From then on, it almost became an obligation for critics and journalists, when writing about one of the singers, to compare him with the other two; and references to the trio became – and still are – inevitable when writing about French song.

The careers of Brel, Brassens and Ferré reached their peaks at different times, and it is therefore not until the three of them were well established, in the early 1960s, that comparisons between them became recurrent. Ferré started his career after the war, and by 1950, he was regularly performing in famous Parisian cabarets, like the Quod Libet and Milord l'Arsouille; however, real success only came in the early 1960s, and one of his biographers, Jacques Layani, considers 1961 to be the year of Ferré's breakthrough.² Brassens, although he had started composing songs before the war, made a name for himself in 1952, when cabaret singer Patachou launched him onto the stage. Brel's musical career started in 1953-54, but despite the successes of songs like *Quand on n'a que l'amour* (1956) and *La Valse à mille temps* (1959), it was not until his

¹ François-René Cristiani and Jean-Pierre Leloir, *Trois hommes dans un salon: Brel Brassens Ferré* (Paris: Fayard/Editions du Verbe (chorus), 2003).

² Jacques Layani, *La mémoire et le temps* (Paris: Paroles et Musique, Seghers 1987).

triumph at the Olympia music-hall, in October 1961, that he definitively became a major name of French song and started being compared and associated with Brassens and Ferré.

The earliest occurrence of a comparison dates back to 1953 and concerns Ferré and Brassens. In a review of one of Ferré's performances, a journalist wrote: 'Avec sa chemise rouge à col ouvert, son masque tourmenté et tragique, ses yeux pétillants qui lancent des éclairs, Léo Ferré nous apparaît tout d'abord comme une sorte de révolté, d'anarchiste de la chanson. Son répertoire, comme celui de Brassens, contient maintes passages au picrate.'³ The aspect of the performances which first allowed a comparison between Brassens and Ferré was therefore the bitterness of their songs. In the above quotation, the 'passages au picrate' are not negatively connoted and seem to be justified by the *révolté* and anarchic character of the performer. Interestingly, anarchy and revolt, characterised on stage by apparent misanthropy for Ferré and stubborn individualism for Brassens, are themes on which the two singers were compared throughout their careers. According to Louis-Jean Calvet, Ferré even considered that Brassens, whose career started after his, had 'stolen' his anarchist audience.⁴ As this chapter will analyse further, such 'accusations' increased the ambiguity of the relationship between the two singers.

1961 is the year of Brel's first triumph at the Olympia music-hall; it is also the year of Johnny Hallyday's first triumph, at the same music-hall, symbolising the definite arrival and success of rock 'n' roll music in France. As Brel joined the ranks of the major names of French song, he also joined the ranks, by default, of the representatives of Franco-French *chanson* as opposed to Anglo-American-inspired rock or *yéyé* music. Brel, as well as Brassens, Ferré and all the other singer-songwriters who

³ A. Ransan 'Léo Ferré à l'Arlequin', *L'Aurore*, 3 November 1953.

⁴ Louis-Jean Calvet, *Léo Ferré* (Paris: Flammarion, 2003) p.64.

were the heirs of traditional *chanson*, therefore came to represent the authenticity of French song, with its poetic lyrics, as opposed to the modern, rhythm-focused *yéyé* song, with its superficial and often foreign lyrics. From then on, ‘poet’ and ‘troubadour’ became recurrent attributes of *chanson* singers in reviews and analyses of performances; and if Brel, Brassens and Ferré often shared these attributes with others, like Trenet, Montand or Aznavour for example, they assumed the status of emblematic figures in the field of French *chanson*.

Reviewing one of Ferré’s concerts in 1961, G. Dornand wrote: ‘Et nous voici en tête à tête intime [...] avec ce vrai poète de la chanson, ce mélodiste de la poésie, qui gardera désormais une place sans pareille dans la pléiade du siècle, celle où n’ont encore pris rang que Trénet, Brassens, Prévert, Lemarque et Mouloudji, peut-être avec Brel’.⁵ A few months later, an article in *L’Express*, analysing the place of French *chanson* in the newly emerged Anglo-American music era, identified ten big names of French *chanson*, ten ‘*Grands*’ – a term which then became a recurrent qualifier of Brel, Brassens and Ferré:

À l’époque du disc et du transistor, où en sont les chanteurs français?
Ils sont dix – dix grands – déjà ou encore... de 18 à 73 ans! Chevalier le Parigot,
Trenet le poète, Montand le prolo, Distel le gentil, Bécaud le dynamique, Brassens
l’anarchiste, Aznavour le paumé, Brel l’ardent, Léo Ferré le féroce.⁶

Brel, Brassens and Ferré were regulars among the poets and the ‘*Grands*’ of *chanson*, as the preceding examples testify. Consequently, ‘poetry’ and ‘greatness’ became common denominators of their work, and they also started to feed comparisons between the three singers, comparisons which became increasingly frequent from the early 1960s onwards. Reviewing Brassens’ Olympia concert in 1962, Michel Perez compared him to

⁵ G. Dorand, ‘Gerbe de musique et de poésie. Le beau récital de Léo Ferré au théâtre du Vieux Colombier’, *Libération*, 01 February 1961, p.2.

⁶ ‘Music-hall – Les dix grands’, *L’Express*, 26 October 1961, pp.22-23.

Ferré: ‘Lui opposer Léo Ferré n’est pas très sage, et préférer Brassens est plus facile’;⁷

in an article about Brel, Alain Bosquet explained why he preferred Brel to Montand,

Brassens and Ferré:

Au même moment se produisent à Paris les troubadours de la chanson.[...] le moins convaincant encore, c’est Yves Montand. [...] La manière plus monolithique de Georges Brassens a, en même temps, de la sincérité et de la monotonie. [...]

Le cas de Léo Ferré me semble plus complexe, [...]. Le parti pris de la gifle au bourgeois est devenu pour lui une loi trop immuable pour qu’on ne la tienne pas pour suspecte. [...]

J’ai été séduit [...] par Jacques Brel. [...] [Il est] l’un des êtres qui assument sans pitié l’état sensible de notre époque, en lui donnant sa vraie dimension tragique et palpitante.⁸

Finally, when *Les Lettres Françaises* dedicated an article to Ferré questioning his qualities as a poet, the magazine extended its reservation to Brassens and Brel: ‘Les intellectuels, qui aiment bien Ferré, admettaient quelquefois [qu’il fût un poète], mais c’était pour lui faire plaisir (je le dirais aussi bien de Brassens et de Jacques Brel)’.⁹

The emphasis on poetry in the comparisons between the singers gained in significance as they became the first three singer-songwriters to be included among the poets, in the well-known collection ‘Poètes d’aujourd’hui’ published by Seghers. As Dimitris Papanikolaou has very pertinently observed, the publisher’s aim of forging a link between poetry and the popular,¹⁰ introducing Ferré in his collection in 1962, Brassens in 1963, and Brel in 1964, greatly contributed to legitimising the qualifier ‘poet’ which had already been attributed to them. At a time when the *yéyé* style was thought to be distorting song lyrics, Clouzet, in his introduction to Brel’s songs in the Seghers volume, went as far as naming Brel, Brassens and Ferré as the redeemers of *chanson*: explaining that ‘la chanson eût pu devenir un remarquable support d’images poétiques’, he then added that ‘à part Brel, Brassens et Ferré, les poètes n’ont pas su

⁷ Michel Perez, ‘Georges Brassens à l’Olympia’, *Combat*, 10 December 1962.

⁸ Alain Bosquet, ‘Jacques Brel’, *Combat*, 11 December 1962.

⁹ ‘Léo Ferré’, *Les Lettres Françaises*, 17 October 1963.

¹⁰ Papanikolaou, pp.34-35.

exploiter ce nouveau champ d'investigation et la chanson est devenue vulgarité et platitude'.¹¹

Even abroad, Brel, Brassens and Ferré aroused comparisons, and when Brel, in December 1965, triumphed at the Carnegie Hall in New York, the *New York Times* described him, a bit excessively, as a singer 'now recognised with Léo Ferré and Georges Brassens in the front rank of the chansonniers of Europe' before adding that 'It was clear Saturday night that Mr. Brel at this stage of the game had stepped ahead of even the gifted Mr. Ferré and the gifted Mr. Brassens'.¹² However, the most emblematic benchmark of the trio's history, the event which finalised and even legitimised the systematic association of Brel, Brassens and Ferré, is undeniably the interview organised by the young journalist François-René Cristiani on 6 January 1969, an interview which brought together for the first and only time the three singers whom the journalist unequivocally addressed, as mentioned in the introduction, as 'les trois plus grands auteurs-compositeurs-interprètes de la chanson française'.¹³ The significance of this interview and of its legacy will be analysed in further detail at the end of the present chapter, but it can already be said that it is a major element of the formation of the trio and of the establishment of Brel, Brassens, and Ferré as key landmarks in the study of *chanson*.

2) The trio and the study of *chanson*

Critics who have written about *chanson* since the three singers rose to prominence have unfailingly mentioned them, compared them or associated them. Brel, Brassens and

¹¹ Jean Clouzet, *Jacques Brel*, (Paris: Seghers, coll. Poètes d'aujourd'hui, 1964); édition augmentée (coll. Poésie et chansons, 1987), p.14.

¹² Robert Alden, 'Jacques Brel Has a U.S. Debut', *New York Times*, 7 December 1965.

¹³ Cristiani and Leloir, p.14.

Ferré have remained a trio symbolising ‘artistes révoltés’, popular poets, resistance to *yéyé* music, and more generally, the excellence of *chanson*. In 1987, Jacques Layani wrote about Ferré: ‘Il est le dernier géant et il le sait. Brel, en 1978, Brassens, en 1981, sont partis. Ferré n’ignore pas que, derrière lui, on tournera une page de la chanson et, disons-le, de la poésie française’.¹⁴ Patrick Baton likewise identified the three singers, in 1990, as the most important characters of the history of *chanson*: ‘L’histoire a déjà fait son choix: Trenet, œuvre à part; et puis Brel, Brassens, Ferré. C’est tout, à quelques exceptions près’.¹⁵ The importance of Brel, Brassens, and Ferré has also resided, for many critics, in the fact that they were the only *chanson* singers who had not been affected by the rock revolution; commenting on the ‘yéyé wave’, Jacques Vassal declared that ‘seuls Brassens et Brel la traverseront indemnes’,¹⁶ as if the popularity of rock threatened to contaminate the *chanson* genre. The three singers’ works have also been seen by critics as embodying aspects of French national identity; Christopher Pinet, for example, whose article will be examined in detail in Chapter Four, argues that the values illustrated in the singers’ works were ‘solidly Third Republic, but it took Brassens, Brel, and Ferré to provide a link to a romanticised but more acceptable past’.¹⁷ More recently, Laurent Bibard, discussing the idea of ‘France’, has declared: ‘Nous estimons indispensable la compréhension de l’œuvre de trois auteurs compositeurs interprètes de langue française pour comprendre l’état culturel de ce pays’;¹⁸ after which a footnote explained that he was referring to Brel, Brassens, and Ferré.

¹⁴ Jacques Layani, *La mémoire et le temps* (Paris: Paroles et Musique, Seghers 1987), p.42.

¹⁵ Patrick Baton, *Jacques Brel, une œuvre* (Bruxelles: Éditions Labor, 1990), p.12-13.

¹⁶ Jacques Vassal, Léo Ferré : l’enfant millénaire (Tours: Les Éditions Hors Collection, 2003), p.94.

¹⁷ Christopher Pinet, ‘The image of the French in the songs of Georges Brassens’, *Contemporary French Civilisation*, vol.VI, 1-2 (Fall-Winter 1981), pp.271-94, (p.283).

¹⁸ Laurent Bibard, *Penser avec Brel* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2006) p.57.

It is important to point out, however, that other singers have been associated with one another, and in particular, that Brel and Brassens have repeatedly been associated with Barbara or with Bécaud to form what journalists called the three 'Bs'. As far as Ferré is concerned, comparisons with Ferrat and Gainsbourg have also been frequent; with the former, mainly in relation with revolt and political commitment, and with the latter as regards musical innovation and eroticism. Brel, Brassens and Ferré have also often been associated with a wider group of singers such as Gainsbourg, Reggiani, Aznavour, Ferrat or Barbara, which confirms that the trio has never been strictly exclusive; nevertheless, it cannot be denied that the association of Brel, Brassens and Ferré has always been more frequent and perceived as less contestable. As Sarah Poole observed: 'With Georges Brassens and Léo Ferré, Brel made up a triumvirate which represented the *summum* of French *chanson*, and whose influence on contemporary French singer-songwriters is oft proclaimed and anyway indisputable'.¹⁹ As will be discussed below, despite the fact that other clusters of singers were often created by journalists, Brel, Brassens, and Ferré had a complementarity which seemed to legitimise their association.

All the critics and articles quoted above, as well as most other studies discussing the trio, have in common the fact that however pertinent their analyses of the singers, they never focus on the genesis of the association. Some authors, when comparing the singers, have drawn their readers' attention to specific points which perfectly justify punctual connections between the three artists, such as, for example, the humour of their songs, the individualism of the characters, or the poetry of their works; but none of them has investigated the deep meaning of the tacit acceptance of the three singers as a trio.

¹⁹ Sara Poole, *Brel and Chansons: a Critical Appreciation* (Dallas, Lanham, Boulder, New York and Oxford: University Press of America, 2004), p.xv.

Recent studies, among whose authors are notably Peter Hawkins, Dimitris Papanikolaou, and David Looseley,²⁰ have very insightfully started to remedy the situation by highlighting the fact that the systematic association of the three singers is in no way self-evident; but as none of these authors had the trio as the central focus of their studies, questions have been raised, but not fully explored.

This introductory chapter intends to build upon and develop the questions raised by these critics, by further supporting the reservations that can be had regarding the legitimacy of systematically associating Brel, Brassens and Ferré. The aim of what follows will indeed be to destabilise the tacit acceptance of the three singers as a trio: firstly, by emphasising that their relationship, their personalities, and their works, offered no clear basis on which to associate the three artists; and secondly, by demonstrating that Brel, Brassens, and Ferré, had no more nor less in common with other singer-songwriters, such as Ferrat, Aznavour, Gainsbourg, or Barbara, for example – who were equally representative of the *chanson* of the time, and whose works were at least as significant as that of the three singers.

B – Three singers with no obvious connections

1) Personal relationships between Brel, Brassens, and Ferré

Nothing, in the lives and personalities of Brel, Brassens and Ferré, predestined them to become a trio; they came from different backgrounds, Brel being the son of a Belgian middle-class industrial, Brassens of a Sétois mason, and Ferré of the comfortably

²⁰ Peter Hawkins, *Chanson: The French Singer-Songwriter from Aristide Bruant to the Present Day* (Aldershot and Burlington, USA: Ashgate, 2000); Dimitris Papanikolaou, *Singing Poets: Literature and Popular Music in France and Greece* (Oxford: Legenda, 2007); David Looseley, *Popular Music in Contemporary France*, (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2003).

wealthy director of the Monaco casino. Besides, the three men's careers, as has been observed earlier, developed at different times and never really brought them together in the same locations. The relationships between the three singers were always cordial, but never overtly friendly or conflictual. The three of them only met together once, on the day of the famous interview, on 6 January 1969; in an endnote, Cristiani alluded to another private meeting which might have taken place between the three men a few days after the interview,²¹ but the information remained unconfirmed. The three artists, however, did know each other, and although they hardly ever met as a trio, interactions between pairs of them did exist.

Brel and Brassens were the ones on friendliest terms, despite Brassens having unwittingly been detrimental to Brel's early career by once calling him '*l'abbé Brel*'. In 1953, when Brassens was already famous and Brel still struggling to break through, Brassens, who had a habit of attaching nicknames to everybody, indeed offended Brel by calling him a 'priest'; Marc Robine thus described the facts:

Avisant la chasuble, la dégaine et, surtout, le ton franchement moralisateur du jeune Belge, il le surnomme '*l'abbé Brel*'. Brassens, on le sait, était le meilleur des hommes, et il sera peut-être, par la suite, le seul véritable ami chanteur que Jacques aura jamais; mais il n'a jamais pu résister au plaisir d'un bon mot, si féroce soit-il.²²

The word was spread and Brel, whose early songs did express something of a boy-scout ideology, became '*l'abbé Brel*' for the media. Although Brassens never meant to impinge on Brel's career, his nickname encouraged prejudice against the young singer; when in 1958, for example, Jacques Canetti asked Bruno Coquatrix, director of the

²¹ Cristiani and Leloir, p.77, note 27.

²² Marc Robine, *Chorus: les cahiers de la chanson n°25: Spécial Jacques Brel*, (Brézolles: Les Éditions du Verbe, Automne 1998), p.74.

Olympia, to add Brel to his programme, he refused categorically, arguing: 'Brel, c'est l'abbé Brel, un point c'est tout!'²³

However, biographers of both Brassens and Brel hardly ever fail to observe that the two artists subsequently became friends, although they never became intimate friends and their friendship was not known to the public. Their relationship might partly be explained by the fact that they were neighbours for a while, and therefore saw each other outside the music world more frequently. Biographers have told anecdotes of Brel driving his neighbour Brassens, who was suffering from kidney stones, to the hospital; Todd even points out that when Brel, terminally ill, secretly came back from the Marquesas Islands to Paris to record his last album, Brassens was one of the few friends whom he saw there. These events, though, never had a media impact since they were kept private until after the singers' deaths. The only significant public connection between them was a joint interview conducted by Jean Serge in January 1966 for the radio station Europe n°1; but one occurrence certainly cannot be accounted a deliberate decision on the part of the artists to be associated, particularly since, according to Todd, being systematically compared to Brassens irritated Brel.²⁴

The relationship between Brassens and Ferré was neither clear nor simple. They were not part of each other's circle of friends and they hardly ever met; so the public's idea of their relationship seems to have been constructed through statements and reported conversations in the media and in biographies. Although, as has been mentioned above, Ferré was thought to have a grudge against Brassens who had supposedly conquered 'his' audience, he repeatedly expressed his affection for Brassens and his desire to know him better. Ferré actually blamed the media for distorting his

²³ Robine, p.80.

²⁴ Olivier Todd, *Jacques Brel: une vie* (Paris: Laffont, 1984), p.177.

words and therefore creating awkwardness between the two artists. In an interview for the magazine *Rock & Folk*, in 1971, he gave the following example:

Tiens, une autre histoire récente: Michel Lancelot [...] m'appelle un jour pour faire une émission avec Brassens et moi: j'arrive, on me dit que c'est une émission de Michèle Arnaud. Je refuse de la faire, car il y a un cadavre entre cette femme et moi depuis dix-sept ans. [...] Là-dessus arrive Georges qui me dit que je dois avoir mes raisons et que le mieux c'est qu'on s'en aille tous les deux avant qu'elle arrive. Lancelot se pointe, Georges l'engueule. [...] Je m'en vais, Georges reste pour ne pas laisser tomber Michel. Le lendemain dans *l'Aurore*: 'Dès que Léo Ferré a vu Brassens, il est parti'.²⁵

Regardless of the truth of Ferré's perspective on the situation, the general pattern of the relationship between the two singers seems to be a series of misunderstandings, never alluded to by Brassens, and often justified or denied by Ferré. Another example of an opportunity of friendship failed by a third party can be found in *Le Parisien*, when Ferré confessed, in 1988: 'Georges, je voulais l'emmener en Toscane pour le faire guérir par une mama miraculeuse. Son ami René Fallet, qui me détestait, l'en a dissuadé'.²⁶

In the same article, Ferré likewise regretted not having been a friend of Brel's, but instead of blaming a third party, he actually blamed Brel himself: 'Jacques me laissait croire que nos démesures nous rapprochaient, mais, derrière mon dos, répétait partout: "Chez Léon tout est bidon!"'.²⁷ According to Lacout though, Brel's remarks were not meant to offend, and Ferré knew it; reporting Ferré's words during a private conversation, Lacout wrote: 'Brel avait pris l'habitude de m'appeler Léon. Pourquoi ? je n'en ai jamais rien su. Il disait à certains de mes copains: "chez Léon tout est bidon". Un jour je le lui ai dit. Il s'est mis à rigoler: "mais enfin, Léo, c'est pour plaisanter". Il était comme ça, Brel'.²⁸ Ferré, however, several times declared his liking for Brel; for example, in a television programme that he recorded in 1975 in which he improvised on

²⁵ 'Entretien avec Léo Ferré', *Rock & Folk*, January 1971.

²⁶ 'Léo Ferré: "J'aurais aimé être l'ami de Brel et Brassens!"', *Le Parisien*, 25 April 1988.

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ Lacout, p.147.

a piano, talking about fellow singers: ‘Les poètes ce sont de drôles de types qui vivent de leur plume: c’est Trenet, c’est Brassens, c’est Brel, qui est en train de faire le tour du monde sur son bateau avec une petite camarade, il est pas mal ce type’.²⁹

It is difficult to know whether what the singers used to say about each other, privately or publicly, was true or not. They maintained that they liked each other, but some biographers have claimed the contrary: ‘Entre les trois monstres sacrés il n’y a que peu d’atomes crochus. Ils se détestent même cordialement.’³⁰ What is less uncertain is that the three artists never personally did anything to encourage the connection which the media and the public had made between them; and if Ferré did seem to approve of such a connection, his comments about it were too infrequent to be influential.

2) Three different styles

If Brel, Brassens, and Ferré had no personal connection which could justify their systematic association, the genesis of the trio cannot be explained by resemblances between their works either; for, despite developing common themes and bearing the same marks of the cultural ideologies of the time – as the present chapter will demonstrate below – the three artists’ works testify to very different approaches to creating and performing songs.

Firstly, the relations between lyrics and music in the three singers’ works are very different. Ferré was the only one who actually ever took music lessons, and his knowledge of music was consequently superior to that of Brel and Brassens. Ferré, contrary to his two colleagues, claimed never to have composed music with the sole intention to support lyrics: music was the central focus of his creation. According to

²⁹ Database of the Institut National de l’Audiovisuel in Paris (will be thereafter referred to as ‘INA’), *Le Grand Echiquier*, Channel 2, 26 June 1975.

³⁰ Fléouter, p.141.

Calvet, Ferré was not, originally, interested in writing lyrics, but started doing so because he could not find a lyricist who suited him.³¹ Contrary to Brassens, for example, who claimed to have been influenced by popular singers like Tino Rossi and Charles Trenet, Ferré's first musical emotions, as he often told journalists, were triggered by classical music when, as a child, he first heard Beethoven on the radio in a café in Bordighera, and when, as a teenager, he heard Ravel rehearsing at the Monaco concert-hall. Ferré's profound interest in music is particularly apparent in the heterogeneity of his work. Far from sticking to a specific genre, Ferré's music was always versatile, innovative and experimental: he unscrupulously mixed classical and pop music in his creations, set his own lyrics to Beethoven or Ravel, and sang accompanied by a rock band. In an interview in 1978, he alluded to a concert organised by the Federation of the Communist Party, during which he played Ravel after playing some of his own songs: 'Eh bien il y a huit ou dix mille jeunes gens qui se sont levés après le *Concerto pour la main gauche* de Ravel! C'était donc pas de moi'.³² Ferré took advantage of all the new techniques and styles which the period put at his disposal: when the appearance of the LP made it possible to create songs that lasted more than three minutes, Ferré developed a new style which Calvet referred to as the '*récitatif*', in which 'la prosodie prend le pas sur la mélodie' and 'la voix est l'instrument principal du rythme';³³ in the latter half of his career, as he refused to sing without the accompaniment of orchestral music, he recorded his own orchestrations and during his concerts appeared on stage with no musicians, only accompanied by his own recordings.

³¹ Calvet, *Léo Ferré*, p.41.

³² Quentin Dupont, *Léo Ferré: Vous savez qui je suis, maintenant?* (Monaco: La mémoire et la mer, 2003), p.410.

³³ Calvet, *Léo Ferré*, p.14.

The independence of Ferré's music is also illustrated by the fact that he regularly 'recycled' his own poems to use them as material for new musical creations; the best example of this is his long poem *La mémoire et la mer*, which he dismantled and transformed into various songs, as he explained, later, in an interview: 'j'ai pris des textes et dans le livre qui s'appelle *Testament Phonographe*, il y a *La mémoire et la mer*, qui est la chanson que vous connaissez, il y a une chanson qui s'appelle *Christie*, il y a une chanson qui s'appelle *F.L.B.*, et puis dans le disque qui s'appelle *Il est six heures ici et midi à New-York*, [...] il y a *Des mots* qui faisait partie de *La mémoire et la mer*.'³⁴

Brassens, on the contrary, confessed to focusing primarily on the melody. He worked laboriously on his verse to which he set a suitable music that he made as discreet as possible in order not to overshadow the melody. Brassens used to tell his friends and journalists that he had been brought up with songs, since his mother and sister sang and played songs all day, and had thus learned a wide variety of songs and developed a taste for those that could be easily remembered; and as Calvet observed: 'Il a trouvé chez Vincent Scotto, le guitariste, le goût des mélodies populaires, celles qui attrapent l'oreille et ne la lâche plus, ces mélodies qui sont le premier véhicule de la chanson, avant même qu'on en retienne les mots'.³⁵ Brassens himself said in an interview in 1970: 'À notre époque, le texte est un moyen mnémotechnique pour retenir la musique'.³⁶ His dedication to the melody meant that his musical and lyrical efforts all converged towards the simplicity of the communication of his songs. Simplicity of communication, as many critics and musicians have repeatedly argued, did not imply simplicity of the tune or of the melody; on the contrary, Brassens' music was carefully constructed, and Calvet rightly observes that musicians who heard Brassens' music

³⁴ Dupont, p.285.

³⁵ Calvet, *Georges Brassens*, p.25.

³⁶ Quoted in Michel Beaufils, *Brassens, poète traditionnel* (Paris : Imbert-Nicholas, 1976), p.87.

unanimously considered his melodies and harmonies to be very skilful.³⁷ Indeed, he composed original harmonies on a piano and an organ, which allowed him to create complex melodies, and then, in order to be able to accompany himself on stage, adapted them for the guitar, thereby rubbing off instrumental effects to keep only the melodic line; in Calvet's words, 'ce processus, que confirment de nombreux témoins, réduit à néant un lieu commun souvent lu ou entendu: les musiques de Brassens seraient monotones parce qu'il composait sur guitare'.³⁸

Contrary to Ferré, then, whose compositions were characterised by his vibrant orchestrations, Brassens' musical watchwords were discretion and subtlety: apart from himself and his guitar, Brassens was only accompanied on stage by his bassist. Both singers – although Brassens probably more than Ferré – were greatly influenced by jazz and swing rhythms, but this influence was so subtly integrated by Brassens in his melodies that it only transpired, as Calvet observed, through the way in which he placed his voice: 'la manière de chanter de Georges Brassens est souvent comparable à celle des chanteurs de blues, notamment par sa mise en place et sa façon d'attaquer un peu en retard sur l'accompagnement'.³⁹ As a result of its sobriety, and despite its originality, Brassens' work was therefore accepted as accessible, popular, and traditional, whereas that of Ferré was more frequently referred to as eccentric, intellectual, and even pretentious.

As for Brel, the central focus of his creation were dramatic effects. Brel had no training as a musician, and even if at the beginning of his career he composed his own songs on the guitar, critics – such as Eric Zimmermann for example –,⁴⁰ musicians, and the public, all agree that the quality of his songs greatly improved when he started

³⁷ Calvet, *Georges Brassens*, p.233.

³⁸ Calvet, *Georges Brassens*, p.63.

³⁹ Calvet, *Georges Brassens*, p.259.

⁴⁰ Eric Zimmermann and Jean-Pierre Leloir, *Jacques Brel, le rêve en partage* (Paris: Didier Carpentier, 1998).

collaborating with his orchestrator François Rauber, in 1956, his pianist Gérard Jouannest, in 1958, and his accordionist Jean Corti, in 1960. Brel used to write lyrics for which he mentally created a tune and a rhythm, and basically left it to his musician to actually perform his mental creation. Video footages of Brel rehearsing and composing are very telling on the matter and testify to the strong connection and understanding between the singer and his musicians; for Brel was demanding, but had a very unconventional way of directing his musicians. The most famous illustration of Brel's way of directing his musicians was immortalised in the song *Vesoul* in 1968, when in the middle of the recording Brel asked his accordionist, Marcel Azolla, to play with more dynamism: his '*Chauffe Marcel, chauffe!*' has since become an integral part of the song, and a symbol of his total involvement in the creative process.

Brel, therefore, not only made his music serve his lyrics: he made himself serve the character (present in the lyrics). Brel's performances were so dramatic that it was obvious that all his efforts and that of his musicians converged towards the emotion of the character that he impersonated. It was underlined above that in Brassens' work, music and lyrics were less easily dissociable than in Ferré's; as far as Brel is concerned, not only are music and lyric indissociable, but so is his performance. This is why the music in Brel's songs is often more dramatic than purely melodic; Stéphane Hirschi, commenting on the simplicity of Brassens' orchestrations which underlined the elegance of his melodies, also observed: 'Brel aura au contraire souvent besoin des effets d'un orchestre symphonique, avec lequel les contrastes de ses silences ou de ses a capella n'en seront que plus saisissants'.⁴¹

⁴¹ Stéphane Hirschi, *Jacques Brel, chant contre le silence* (Paris: Librairie Niset, coll. chanteurs-poètes n°2, 1995), p.35.

Such differences in the three singers' approaches to composing songs inevitably implied differences in the format and performances of the songs. Three men with different origins, different personalities, and different conceptions of the art of song, Brel, Brassens and Ferré obviously used a different language and adopted different attitudes towards their public. Ferré's language and his behaviour on stage were very provocative: he made abundant use of slang words, and made many erotic references which, as his career developed, became increasingly pornographic. Videos of Ferré on stage show him raising his fist as he professed his love of anarchy and his distrust of institutions. For many years, Ferré's concerts unfailingly caused trouble, whether it was caused by his exalted fans or his enthusiastic detractors.

Brassens, on the contrary, was famously uncomfortable and hardly expressive on stage. He also used slang a lot, but as Calvet pointed out, the affected embarrassment with which he uttered rude words made anything he said acceptable: 'Brassens, donc, riait dans sa moustache chaque fois que, sur scène, il prononçait un "gros" mot, comme pour en atténuer l'effet. Et il y a là un trait fondamental: lorsque Léo Ferré par exemple lâche le mot cul ou le mot salope [...], le phrasé, l'intonation, la façon de cracher les syllabes en font des vocables agressifs'.⁴² Brassens' shyness and awkwardness on stage greatly appealed to his public who took it as a sign of his authenticity, and his obvious lack of comfort as regards celebrity perfectly matched the image of the accessible man of the people which his songs gave of him.

As for Brel, his language was always simple, and except for the word '*con*' (only used in the sense of 'stupid') which symbolised all that he despised, he made very little use of slang words. Brel's language was more characterised by his neologisms and his unusual metaphors and images, which he always sang with such passion and

⁴² Calvet, *Georges Brassens*, pp.162-163.

conviction that they were never out of place. In *Amsterdam*, for example, Brel sang about drunken sailors: ‘Ils vous montrent des dents / A croquer la fortune / A décroisser la lune / A bouffer des haubans’; despite the apparent mystery of such a stanza, when Brel first sang this song in 1964, he did not for one moment seem ridiculous or insane. Brel, although he was sick before each performance because of stage fright, was perfectly comfortable on stage; like Brassens, his songs were usually little narratives telling the stories of common people, but unlike Brassens, he literally transformed in front of his audience and incarnated the emotions of each of the characters which he pictured.

It would seem, therefore, that in the same way as the three singers’ personal relationship could not justify their systematic association, neither can their works: they were fundamentally too different. It could be argued that beyond their personalities, the format of their songs, and their attitudes towards their audiences, the three singers had in common certain themes and aspirations; however, and as the present chapter will now endeavour to illustrate, what they had in common they also had in common with other singer-songwriters of the time, who were as significant as them, but who did not go down in history as *the* embodiments of French *chanson*.

C – Brel, Brassens, and Ferré in the broader cultural context

The trio Brel-Brassens-Ferré, as the first part of this chapter has illustrated, has been considered, at least since the 1960s, as a symbol of French *chanson*, of poetic song, and of resistance to *yéyé* music and to the negative effects of the music industry. If, as what precedes has also pointed out, the three singers cannot be assimilated on the basis of the similarities between their work, an investigation of the ideologies behind their songs

and of the values which they advocate might prove more fruitful. A closer look at the content of the songs and at the themes that they develop emphasises that despite their differences, the works of Brel, Brassens, and Ferré are emblematic of the 1960s in that they were influenced by two important factors: the first is the libertarian thought that emerged in the aftermath of the Second World War, and the second is the technological progress which revolutionised song and the profession of the singer during the same period.

However, if the work of Brel, Brassens and Ferré is emblematic of a time, the work of other singers might be deemed equally emblematic: external factors, such as the cultural context, the legacy of previous singers, or the development of music industry, were a denominator common to all chansonniers of the era. Other singer-songwriters of the same period therefore sang about the same themes and were similarly affected by the musical revolutions of the middle of the century. The individualism and humanism, which are typical post-war ideologies and which are omnipresent values in the work of the three singers, can also be found, for example, in the songs of Barbara; likewise, the eroticism of the songs of Brassens and Ferré, emblematic of the post-war sexual revolution, clearly echoed the work of Serge Gainsbourg.

1) Influence of post-war intellectual thought

After the Second World War, the world had become a building site: human beings not only had to rebuild their cities, but they also had to reconstruct their faith in fellow human beings. War is a phenomenon that provokes both ignominy and generosity; it exacerbates human brutality while at the same time encouraging acts of bravery, sacrifices and sentiments of fraternity unequalled in times of peace. This is a paradox

which the two World Wars, given their extent and the number of people that they involved, pushed to the extreme. In France, the phenomenon was amplified by the decolonisation wars which started just as the Second World War was finishing, and which meant that more young lives were being lost to the national cause. In such a context, it is not surprising that the dominant cultural ideologies of the early and mid-twentieth century revolved around pacifism, the meaningfulness or absurdity of life, the will to reform the human being, and a general distrust of authority. The two post-war periods were therefore favourable to the flourishing of groups of artists and intellectuals animated by the same will to try and define new values and rebuild their faith in man. The Dadaist movement, for example, which mainly developed after the First World War, rejected any kind of formal conformism by developing an anti-art which redefined the humane in the absurd; the Surrealist movement, born from Dadaism and still greatly influential after the Second World War, used the same irreverence in order to free men and women from all constraints and help them reconstruct themselves in the immediate present. Such cultural movements were illustrative of a crisis of values which was also characterised by a renewal of enthusiasm for libertarian ideologies, such as anarchism, antimilitarism, and anticlericalism, all animated by the desire to protect the individual against the potentially destructive effects of governments. These were avant-garde movements and were not, therefore, directly connected to popular culture and *chanson*. However, intellectuals regularly met in the cabarets in which singer-songwriters performed, and, because *chanson* was a particularly literary type of song – as will be argued in the following chapter – the influence of such avant-garde movements on *chanson* must not be neglected.

All these aesthetics left their marks, to different extents, on the works of singer-songwriters of the second half of the twentieth century. Aragon, who remained an

emblematic figure of the Surrealist movement despite having broken with it before the Second World War, was set to music by many post-war singers. Ferré dedicated a full album to the poet's works, while Jean Ferrat sang several of his poems; Brassens also famously set to music Aragon's poem, *Il n'y a pas d'amour heureux*, although he made it clear that he did not adhere to Aragon's communist ideals by cutting off the last stanza, which he thought was too political, and by giving the poem the same music as he had given the poem *La prière*, by the catholic poet Francis Jammes. Antimilitarism and pacifism were also recurrent themes in the works of Brel, Brassens, and Ferré, who all insisted on the derision and absurdity of the war. The themes and ideologies developed by the three singers will be examined in more detail in Chapter Four, but it is already worth noticing that whether it were in Brel's *Caporal Casse-Pompon* (1962), Ferré's *Mon Général* (1962), or Brassens' *Les deux oncles* (1964), war was often described as a destructive and pointless inevitability. However, this is also the case in the works of other singer-songwriters of the time, such as Barbara or Ferrat, for example. In Barbara's *Veuve de guerre* (1958), all of the narrator's lovers die in war each in turn, and in Ferrat's *Maria* (1967), the eponymous character's two sons kill each other during the Spanish civil war; both songs are perfectly in the line of the pacifist songs of the time, and are nurtured with the same passionate humanism as the songs of Brel, Brassens, and Ferré.

The individualistic values advocated in the songs of the three singers are another characteristic of the influence of the post-war cultural movements. The central focus of ideologies like pacifism or anarchism being the individual as opposed to the institution, they often expressed themselves through support for individualist theories. But once again, if the three singers' individualism is emblematic of their time, it is not isolated: Ferrat's communist affinities might make him difficult to categorise as an individualist,

but Barbara's work, like Gainsbourg's, to name but two, exude individualism. To say that the works of Brel, Brassens, and Ferré expressed individualism, anticlericalism, antimilitarism, and anti-bourgeois feelings actually amounts to saying that they expressed values which were 'fashionable' and widespread among singer-songwriters and intellectuals of the 1960s.

Another essential characteristic of the 1950s and 1960s that had a direct influence on the singer-songwriters of the period, and that the works of Brel, Brassens, and Ferré illustrate, was the growing interest of poets in the common people, and the increasing porousness of the border between poetry and song in which this interest resulted; for, as Cantaloube-Ferrieu observed in her study of song and poetry: 'Rien ne vaut [la chanson], surtout, pour enfin toucher réellement ce peuple auquel s'intéressent les intellectuels sans bien savoir comment l'atteindre'.⁴³ Since the 1930s, poets like Prévert had been eager to make poetry accessible to a vast audience, and had therefore started to write poems with simpler words and about topics that concerned everyone. As Cantaloube-Ferrieu also pointed out, song became for Prévert a valuable medium through which to make common people feel concerned by cultural and political topics: 'la chanson retrouve avec J.Prévert une vitalité politique qu'elle n'avait plus depuis le XIX^e siècle et diffuse une morale qui, jusqu'ici, n'était pas parvenue à toucher ceux que pourtant elle concernait expressément: les hommes du peuple'.⁴⁴

In parallel, *chanson*, in the 1950s and 1960s, genuinely asserted itself as an art: by setting poets to music, singers brought together the two genres and thus contributed to ennobling *chanson*. Poems by Apollinaire, Aragon, Prévert, or Vian, as mentioned above, were largely diffused through songs; and the skilfulness with which some singers

⁴³ Lucienne Cantaloube-Ferrieu, *Chanson et Poésie des années 30 aux années 60: Trenet, Brassens, Ferré... ou les 'enfants naturels' du surréalisme* (Paris: Niset, 1981), p.175.

⁴⁴ Cantaloube-Ferrieu, p.175.

– among whom were notably Ferré and Brassens – handled the verse of celebrated nineteenth-century poets, such as Baudelaire, Rimbaud, or Hugo, also added to the stature of *chanson* which gradually got rid of its status as a ‘minor’ art. Moreover, connections and collaborations between poets and singers became increasingly frequent. Ferré’s connections with the Surrealist movement, for instance, are well known; his friendship, and then his falling-out, with André Breton have been described in detail by his biographers; his closeness to Louis Aragon, to whose songs he dedicated a full album, was also very significant. These two connections in the poetic world, emphasised by public collaborations between Aragon and Ferré,⁴⁵ contributed to establishing Ferré as a ‘poetic’ singer. However, if the example of Ferré is a good illustration of the close relationship between song and poetry, it must not overshadow the fact that the singer was not in a unique position. Brassens, Montand, and Ferrat also contributed to bridging the gap between poetry and song by setting poems to music, and were, as a result, granted the qualifier ‘poetic’ singers; moreover, calling singers ‘poets’ triggered debates, in the media, about the nature of poetry and song, which further associated singers with the theme ‘poetry’. As significantly, Brel, Barbara, or Gainsbourg, who never set any poet to music, were also granted the title, which illustrates the fact that the cultural tendency towards the popularisation of poetry had an impact on the entire genre of *chanson* rather than exclusively on the singers who actively connected the two genres; or, as this study will suggest below, singers like Brel, Barbara or Gainsbourg testify to a particular aspect of what could be called the ‘popularisation of poetry’ in the post-war period, which is a redefinition of the border and of the hierarchy existing between oral and written genres.

⁴⁵ See, for example, the articles ‘Aragon et la composition musicale’ by Léo Ferré, and ‘Léo Ferré et la mise en chanson’ by Aragon, published in *Les Lettres Françaises*, 19-25 January 1961.

Brel, Brassens, and Ferré can therefore be seen as representatives of a cultural renewal emblematic of the post-war period in France. Some of the values conveyed through their songs and identified above, such as, notably, individualism and pacifism, testify to the relevance of their work in the modern socio-intellectual context of the 1950s and 1960s. What precedes has also demonstrated that the three singers were very much in keeping with the post-war endeavour to popularise poetry, and, more generally, to democratise culture. In many of the values that they embody and in their attitudes, Brel, Brassens, and Ferré can actually be said to embrace modernism: their songs are innovative, their individualism finds a perfect echo in modern society, and their liberal ideas about morals, religion, and marriage are also popular in a society at the dawn of a sexual revolution.

However, as will be observed in the next section, the three singers are also representatives of the *chanson* genre, and at a time when songs and music were shifting towards new rock, jazz and blues rhythms, *chanson* was a more traditional genre which, contrary to rock music, did not exclusively appeal to modern youth. *Chanson*, as this study will argue below, can therefore be considered as a symbol of the struggle against the music industry, globalisation, and modernism – and has indeed been considered so by many critics and members of the public. Moreover, as Chapter Four will argue in detail, the traditionalism associated with the *chanson* genre extended, in the three singers' case, to some of the moral values conveyed through their work or through their public profiles. For example, this thesis will argue that despite their liberal attitude towards marriage, Brel, Brassens, and Ferré had a very traditional – even conservative – attitude towards gender relations.

What is being sketched here, then, is the idea that Brel, Brassens, and Ferré (but not exclusively: the same could apply to other *chanson* authors) embodied ambiguous –

sometimes even paradoxical – ideals. The analysis of these ideals will be one of the main objectives of Chapter Four, but in order to understand fully the variety of elements that contributed to the success of the trio, it is essential to highlight at this early stage the paradoxes inherent to the trio, and to suggest that these paradoxes might be one of the most significant aspects of the singers’ ‘*Frenchness*’. As will be argued below, the singers were both modernists and anti-modernists, they were bourgeois and anti-bourgeois, or, as the final chapter of this thesis will refer to them, they were traditionalist nonconformists.

2) A period of transition for song and music

As well as being emblematic of the cultural context of their time, the works of Brel, Brassens and Ferré also testify to the legacy of artists who have preceded them, and to the impact of the development of the music industry on this legacy. The three singers unanimously acknowledged the influence of Edith Piaf and above all Charles Trenet on their works and on song in general. The main legacy of these two singers was the increasing importance of the performer. As Hermelin remarked, Trenet ‘sera, en effet, le premier de l’époque moderne à donner l’impression de construire une œuvre: un style, un vocabulaire, une thématique qui est la sienne avec son unité et sa logique propre’.⁴⁶ With Piaf, as Gérard Poulet explained, ‘the persona is almost as important as the performer’; Piaf had an ‘extraordinary *présence* on stage which a few cinematographic archives demonstrate. She had a vibrating voice and an emotional delivery which made pathos respectable, because she sang as she lived and loved: passionately’.⁴⁷ Piaf and Trenet, therefore, both contributed to modernising the *chanson* genre and making its

⁴⁶ Christian Hermelin, *Ces chanteurs que l’on dit poètes* (Paris: L’École, collection Données actuelles, 1970), p.30.

⁴⁷ Gérard Poulet, ‘Popular Music’, in *French Culture since 1945* (London: Longman, 1993), p.194.

centre of gravity switch from the performance to the performer. Given the charisma of Brel, Brassens, and Ferré on stage, and the almost excessive focus of the public and the media on their personae, it is undeniable that they have integrated their predecessors' legacy; but this is also true of other singer-songwriters of the period, to the extent that a singer like Barbara, for example, is probably more famous than her songs – the same could actually be said of Ferré, as this study will argue below.

The post-war period is one in which music and song gained a greater sociological significance; as the following chapter will develop in further detail, music in the 1950s started dividing generations in a way that it never had before. First of all, jazz was introduced in France between the two wars and quickly became a symbol of modernity and youth; it introduced new rhythms and a certain unconventionality in the musical tradition, which mainly appealed to the younger generations. The influence of jazz music on the French tradition was fundamental and firstly integrated by Trenet, before marking most singer-songwriters of the period, and in particular Brassens, Ferré, and Gainsbourg. Then, rock 'n' roll arrived in France, and as the following chapter will further develop, completed the division between generations. As Calvet remarked in his biography of Brassens: 'Nous avons vu qu'au début des années 30 la chanson est un bien commun, un héritage partagé, et que Georges, sa sœur et ses parents chantaient la même chose. Mais le monde a désormais changé et la vedette Brassens chante pour sa génération, pas pour celle de ses parents, il participe, sans le savoir, à une immense révolution qui va bouleverser la chanson française et façonner son image à l'étranger'.⁴⁸

Brassens, however, like Brel, Ferré, Barbara, Gainsbourg, Ferrat, and many other chanson singers, had started his career in cabarets and sang songs that would be

⁴⁸ Calvet, *Georges Brassens* (Paris: Lieu Commun, 1991), p.132.

situated within the traditions of French song. But because he also used rude words, libertarian images, and had assimilated the changes operated by the Trenet 'revolution' as well as the new sounds and rhythms brought by jazz music, he was therefore emblematic of a period of transition towards a new era of song, an era in which different styles of music appealed to different sections of the population. Brassens, of course, was not the only representative of this sociological transition of songs and music: the works of Ferré and Gainsbourg, for example, because of the experimental dimension of their music and the vivid eroticism of their lyrics, also perfectly illustrated the musical and moral rupture of the 1960s. The works of singer-songwriters such as Brassens, Ferré, or Gainsbourg bore the marks of the transition of the musical world towards the predominance of the music industry, in more than one way. Not only were their performances and their relationship with the public altered by the requirements of the music industry, but these requirements also became recurrent themes in their songs. Ferré's *La Maffia* and *Monsieur Barclay*, for example denounced the purely financial interests of his recording company, while Brassens' *Le bulletin de santé* or *Les trompettes de la renommée*, condemned the invasion of privacy by the media which success in the newly emerged star-system entailed. It is undeniable, then, that the works of Brel, Brassens, and Ferré, were emblematic of the cultural and musical context of the 1950s and 1960s, but it is also undeniable that these three singers had no more common points with each other than with other singer-songwriters, particularly Gainsbourg, Barbara, or Ferrat.

The only certainty about the association of Brel, Brassens, and Ferré, is that it started in the early 1960s, mostly in the media, and that it has remained since then a meaningful emblem of the period's *chanson*; in David Looseley's words, the trio 'today functions as a national signifier, a benchmark not only of aesthetic excellence but also

of authenticity and truth, against which other French artists must be measured and measure themselves'.⁴⁹ What is interesting, however, is that the formation of this trio happened in spite of its protagonists; and even though Ferré did not object to the idea and even liked it, the three singers played no part in their association and did not encourage it in any way. They had no personal connections, led completely different lifestyles, and had different approaches to their profession. As this chapter has demonstrated, their works did express common ideologies and aspirations, but so did the works of many other singer-songwriters of the period; these were therefore not enough to justify the exclusivity of the trio Brel-Brassens-Ferré.

Yet, even Ferré seemed to share the feeling of the media and the public, since he several times expressed the desire to be closer to his two colleagues. In an interview on television in 1967, he told Denise Glaser who had asked him about his contact with fellow artists:

Brassens, [...] j'aimerais bien le voir de temps en temps, qu'on mange ensemble, tous les deux, seuls. Ca n'arrivera jamais, je sais; pourquoi? parce que voilà. Brel, [...] J'aimerais bien aussi le connaître. Il n'y en a pas d'autres avec qui je voudrais vivre un peu comme ça, en dehors de la chanson.⁵⁰

During the 1969 interview itself, Ferré renewed his desire for complicity with Brel and Brassens when he suggested that the three of them should organise a tour in which they would all sing a song each in turn. When Brassens asked him why the three of them, Ferré replied: 'Eh parce que nous trois, enfin...';⁵¹ a response which epitomises the significance of the whole interview. If Ferré's wish was never realised on a personal level, as the title of an 1988 article suggests: 'Léo Ferré: j'aurais aimé être l'ami de Brel et Brassens',⁵² the inseparability of the three singers certainly became true for the public and posterity; and when Ferré was buried in 1993, twelve years after Brassens and

⁴⁹ David L. Looseley, *Popular Music in Contemporary France* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2003), p.68.

⁵⁰ INA, *Discorama*, Channel 1, 22 October 1967.

⁵¹ Cristiani and Leloir, p.57.

⁵² *Le Parisien*, 25 April 1988.

fifteen after Brel, the priest wished him to be reunited with his two colleagues: ‘J’espère que là-haut, il fera un bœuf infernal avec Brel et Brassens’.⁵³

The question which thus arises is: why these three? Their association is certainly not odd or surprising, since they did have common points, but if we only take into consideration their music and lyrics, their association is neither more obvious nor more justifiable than other associations could have been. Many common points could similarly be found between the works of Barbara, Brel, and Aznavour, for example, or between those of Ferrat, Ferré and Vian. It could be argued that what makes Brel, Brassens, and Ferré work well together as a trio is the complementarity of their qualities: Brel’s passion, Brassens’ wit, and Ferré’s voice of protest, indeed create a balanced ideal of *chanson*; this argument will be discussed and questioned in Chapters Three and Four of this thesis. However, when the sole objects of investigation to determine the validity of this argument are the singers’ lives, works, performances, and ideologies, it can also be argued that an association between Barbara, Montand, and Gainsbourg, would have provided the same ideal balance – hence, as this thesis will argue throughout, the importance of considering other factors, such as the artists’ public profiles. There is, however, one common point between Brel, Brassens, and Ferré which still needs to be examined and which has played, as this study will now argue, a significant part in the creation of the trio: the January 1969 interview of the three singers by journalist François-René Cristiani.

⁵³ Père Henri quoted in: Claude Fléouter, *Léo* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1996), p.200.

D – The myth Brel-Brassens-Ferré

1) The 6 January 1969 interview

This interview indeed symbolises the apotheosis of the trio, and, despite being an informal event that lasted no more than a few hours, despite the fact that there never was any other meeting between the three singers, this interview has become a myth which has irrevocably united the names of Brel, Brassens and Ferré. It is of course impossible to speculate about the fate of the trio Brel-Brassens-Ferré had the interview not taken place nor photographs of it ever been published, but it is undeniable that it greatly contributed to mythicising the singers. Jacques Vassal, referring to the famous photograph taken by Jean-Pierre Leloir during the interview, rightly described it as having become a regular symbol of French artistic spirit:

Ce n'est pas par hasard si une photo les représentant tous les trois en pleine discussion [...] est devenue un poster aussi célèbre que celui de 'Che' Guevara, reproduit à des milliers d'exemplaires et fréquemment placardé dans des lieux publics, bibliothèques ou comptoirs de bistrot. En tant qu'hommes et en tant qu'artistes, Brassens, Brel et Ferré ont en commun un certain anticonformisme, une révolte profonde même, propre à soulever les cœurs et les esprits.⁵⁴

If the photograph is the most widespread symbol of the interview, it is not the only one: the entire transcription of the interview was published in the magazine *Chorus* in 1997,⁵⁵ and a full illustrated book was dedicated to it in 2003.⁵⁶ Besides, Anne Kessler, from the *Comédie Française*, even turned this interview into a theatre play, *Trois hommes dans un salon*, which was staged at the Studio-Théâtre in Paris, in May and June 2008. The play ran for over a month, and was, according to critics, a success; the critic in *Pariscope* wrote that Kessler '[a] fait de ce moment éphémère une superbe

⁵⁴ Jacques Vassal, *Léo Ferré: l'enfant millénaire* (Tours: Les Éditions Hors Collection, 2003), p.9.

⁵⁵ *Chorus: les cahiers de la chanson n°20* (Brézolles: Les Éditions du Verbe, Summer 1997).

⁵⁶ François-René Cristiani and Jean-Pierre Leloir, *Trois hommes dans un salon: Brel Brassens Ferré* (Paris: Fayard/Éditions du Verbe (chorus), 2003).

œuvre théâtrale.’⁵⁷ Explaining her motivations for turning the interview into a play, Kessler said that ‘cette rencontre de Brassens, Brel et Ferré est un jalon essentiel dans l’histoire de la chanson en France’.⁵⁸ The magazine *Chorus* even used the format of what it had called ‘Table Ronde’, as a pattern which it reproduced with different artists, notifying its readers that the new interviews were inspired by Cristiani’s 1969 interview of Brel, Brassens and Ferré: in 2002, a ‘Table Ronde’ was published with Cabrel, Goldman, Simon, and Souchon, and in 2004, one with Delerm, Cherhal, and Bénabar.

The undeniable interest generated by the interview therefore raises questions about the reasons for its popularity. Its content was different from what could be expected of an interview with three singers, since in a period when the public was fascinated by idols and when the private lives of celebrities were regularly displayed in the media, Cristiani asked no questions concerning the singers’ private lives. They discussed their profession, the musical world, gave their opinions about Gainsbourg, the Beatles, and the hippy movement, talked about God, women and death. However, although these themes cannot be called banal, several critics agreed that their treatment by Brel, Brassens and Ferré was in no way groundbreaking. Calvet, in his biography of Brassens, commented on the singers’ discussion about the Beatles during the interview, admitting that it said nothing original and that Brel only talked nonsense.⁵⁹ As for Lacout, he plainly observed: ‘L’ensemble de l’entretien n’est d’ailleurs pas très passionnant [...] Trois hommes exceptionnels, chacun à leur manière. Mais trois hommes qui n’ont pas grand-chose à se dire’.⁶⁰ A close reading of the transcription of the interview can indeed confirm that although it would be excessive to say that the singers talked nonsense, there is no doubt that their conversation is more interesting for

⁵⁷ Marie-Céline Nivière, *Le Pariscope*, available from <http://spectacles.premiere.fr>

⁵⁸ Programme of the Studio Théâtre, *Trois hommes dans un salon*, p.9, available from http://www.comedie-francaise.fr/dev/images/telechargements/programme_troishommes.pdf

⁵⁹ Louis-Jean Calvet, *Georges Brassens* (Paris: Lieu Commun, 1991), p.203.

⁶⁰ D. Lacout, *Léo Ferré* (Paris: Sévigny, 1991), p.147.

its contributors than for the topics it developed; and had this conversation taken place between three anonymous people, it would probably not have been remembered so well.

As the enduring celebrity of the interview cannot be attributed to the content of the discussion, one might legitimately think that what has been attractive to the public has been the very existence of the interview. However, it is interesting to note that the director of the play *Trois hommes dans un salon*, as well as some of its critics and François-René Cristiani, do not share this view and consider that the content of the discussion was worth its celebrity. Critic Isabelle Stribbe wrote about ‘un entretien dont la profondeur côtoie parfois, sous des dehors en apparence légers, les textes dramatiques les plus intenses’.⁶¹ Indeed, some of the subjects discussed by the three singers were intense, although they arguably did not treat them as seriously as Stribbe suggests. As for Cristiani, he was asked, in 2008: ‘En quoi les personnalités et les œuvres de ces trois chanteurs vous semblent-elles encore “exemplaires”?’; his answer was: ‘Avant tout pour l’humanité – tranquille, brûlante ou provocante – qui les caractérisait et, bien-sûr, leur talent, qui reste, pour chacun des trois, inégalé, dans des registres différents, mais toujours au plus près de l’homme, des mots, de la poésie et de la musique.’⁶² Even Cristiani’s answer suggests that more importantly than the actual conversation that took place on 6 January 1969, what seems to have made the success of the event is that it gathered together three representatives of authentic French *chanson* who did not indulge in celebrity gossip but who talked simply, sincerely, and with friendliness about subjects that touched everybody. Moreover, this gathering gave a concrete and tangible dimension to the association of Brel, Brassens, and Ferré, an association which had until then remained an unofficial collective assumption. Cristiani’s 1969 interview, therefore,

⁶¹ Isabelle Stribbe, Programme of the Studio Théâtre, p.7.

⁶² François-René Cristiani, Programme of the Studio Théâtre, p.11.

is significant in that it justified and confirmed a feeling already widely accepted, which was that Brel, Brassens and Ferré were the three ‘*Grands*’.

2) Barthes and the ‘concept mythique’

Jean-Pierre Leloir’s photograph of the three singers became a tangible representation of the interview, and thereby a symbolic image of ‘*grande*’ *chanson*. However, what precedes has shown that there has been no definite reason for the singers’ association, and it might therefore be legitimate to think that the real value of the interview and of the photograph comes from what the public (mainly, as Chapter Three will argue, through the media) have seen in it, from the concepts and ideas that they have associated with it. The significance of the trio, in other words, does not so much lie in the singers themselves, but rather in the motivations that went into the creation of the trio and that are behind the mythicisation of the photograph. In order to explore the motivations behind the myth, this study will draw on the theories developed by Roland Barthes in *Mythologies*.⁶³

In *Mythologies*, Barthes analyses various items or phenomena, from steak and chips to the strip-tease, the new Citroën, or plastic, focusing on the role played by these items in society and examining the ways in which this role is determined by social trends and is therefore a clue to better understanding social behaviour and beliefs. Barthes argues that everything (whether a steak and chips or a car) can be a myth, for everything can be talked about and therefore have a significance that goes beyond its mere existence; when talked about, for example, the steak and chips becomes more than food, it becomes the sign of a social practice. Similarly, it could be said that the trio

⁶³ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Seuil, Seuil ‘Points Essais’ n°10, 1970 (1st edition 1957)).

Brel-Brassens-Ferré, because of its popularity and the significance of its legacy – as demonstrated above – is a myth in Barthesian terms, and can be examined according to Barthes’ theories. Barthes’ theories are particularly relevant to this study because they insist on the absence of relation of cause and effect between the sign at the origin of the myth (in this instance, the trio Brel-Brassens-Ferré) and the signification of the myth (*grande chanson* or Frenchness), which means that the trio does not *signify* Frenchness. However, as Barthes also explains, despite the actual absence of relation of cause and effect, the ‘lecteur de mythe’ will still perceive one: ‘là où il n’y a qu’une équivalence, il voit une sorte de procès causal’ (204); and this is precisely what happened with Brel, Brassens, and Ferré. As this chapter has demonstrated, despite there being no obvious reason to consider Brel, Brassens, and Ferré as *the* exemplary trio of French *chanson*, journalists and academics have referred to them as the illustrative examples of *chanson* without judging it necessary to justify themselves, as if it was only natural to interpret the trio thus; they have, in other words, assumed a relationship of cause and effect between the trio and the notion of ideal French *chanson*.

Barthes explains that everything – whether a word or sentence, a photograph, a film, or anything that can be talked about – is a ‘sign’ and is therefore potentially a myth or message. Everything, in other words, can have a signification beyond what it actually represents, and this signification, Barthes explains, is born from the association of this ‘sign’ with a concept. In Barthes’ theoretical study, the myth is a second-order semiological system: ‘le mythe est un système particulier en ceci qu’il s’édifie à partir d’une chaîne sémiologique qui existe avant lui: *c’est un système sémiologique second*’ (187). For the sake of clarity, it should be stressed that a basic semiological system consists of the association of a signifier (an image, an object, or a word for example)

and a signified (what this image, object or word means or represents) into a sign: 'il y a donc le signifiant, le signifié et le signe, qui est le total associatif des deux premiers termes' (185).

A myth is a *second-order* semiological system, because it involves a sign (in the case of the present study, such a sign could be the trio Brel-Brassens-Ferré), which itself is already a semiological system, since a sign is the association of a signifier (three men) and a signified (a trio of singers). Through discourse, this sign will be appropriated by society and thereby integrated into its history; this is why, as Barthes explains at the beginning of his study, everything can be a myth, 'car l'univers est infiniment suggestif. Chaque objet du monde peut passer d'une existence fermée, muette, à un état oral, ouvert à l'appropriation de la société, car aucune loi, naturelle ou non, n'interdit de parler des choses' (182). The sign will then become part of a myth if it is involved in a second-order semiological system; this means that the sign from the first-order system will be separated from its original sense (although, as Barthes also points out, the sense is not completely given up; the sense is impoverished, but remains present in the background) to play the part of the signifier in the second-order system, and will then be associated with a new signified, which Barthes also refers to as a 'concept'. This new association will form a new sign (the sign of the second-order system), which Barthes has called 'signification' and which will be the signification of the myth.

To illustrate his theory, Barthes uses the example of a photograph published in *Paris Match*, which represents a black soldier giving the French military salute under the tricolour.⁶⁴ He explains that the sign of the first-order semiological system (that is to say the black soldier under the French flag) is deprived of its meaning, and therefore

⁶⁴ Although the date of the photograph is not given by Barthes, it should not be forgotten that the essay was written in 1956, when France was struggling with decolonisation wars.

becomes empty enough to be associated with the concept of French imperialism (which is the signified of the second-order semiological system); the association of the black soldier with the concept of French imperialism forms the signification of the myth, which is the significance of French imperialism. In the second-order system, then, the sign serves the concept and is determined by it.

The same system can be applied to the trio Brel-Brassens-Ferré. The sign is the trio, which, as was mentioned above, is the result of a first-order semiological system. The trio then becomes a discourse, mainly, as the following chapters will demonstrate, through the media: it is talked about, interpreted by society, and thereby integrated in its history. As it becomes material for a discourse, the trio loses some of its original meaning: society's interest does not lie in the fact that they are three men who sing, but in what they can be seen to represent, notably, the ideal of French *chanson*. Gradually, the significance of the trio switches from what it actually is (three men who sing) to that with which it can be associated; this entails the signification of the trio being increasingly determined by its newly found signified, the concept of Frenchness. The trio, by passing into the second-order semiological system, switches from '*sens*' to '*forme*', to use Barthes' terminology, and it is as a form (deprived of its original meaning) that it will become part of the myth (even if, as Barthes insists, the original meaning never disappears completely; one is always aware that behind the myth are three singers).

Barthes analyses the switch from *sens* to *forme* thus:

en passant du sens à la forme, l'image perd du savoir: c'est pour mieux recevoir celui du concept. En fait, le savoir contenu dans le concept mythique est un savoir confus, formé d'associations molles, illimitées. Il faut bien insister sur ce caractère ouvert du concept; ce n'est nullement une essence abstraite, purifiée; c'est une condensation informe, instable, nébuleuse, dont l'unité, la cohérence tiennent surtout à la fonction.

En ce sens, on peut dire que le caractère fondamental du concept mythique, c'est d'être *approprié*. (192)

Barthes here explains that a concept is not a pure idea; on the contrary, it is a confused knowledge which is only perceptible once appropriated through its association with a sign: it is only through its association with the sign that the concept makes sense. Using Barthes' theory, then, helps explain how 'Frenchness' is not a pure idea that can be defined independently of its representations: the concept of Frenchness only makes sense through the signs with which it is associated. Barthes also explains that the mythical concept

a à sa disposition une masse illimitée de signifiants: [...] je puis trouver mille images qui me signifient l'impérialité française. Ceci veut dire que *quantitativement*, le concept est bien plus pauvre que le signifiant, il ne fait souvent que se re-présenter. [...] Cette répétition du concept à travers des formes différentes est précieuse pour le mythologue, elle permet de déchiffrer le mythe: c'est l'insistance d'une conduite qui livre son intention. (193)

The sign represented by the trio Brel-Brassens-Ferré is therefore one of an unlimited number of signs defining the notion of Frenchness. However, the trio is not *per se* a representation of Frenchness; it only represents Frenchness in so far as the notion is *intentionally* associated with it. This is why the trio Brel-Brassens-Ferré is not only interesting for what it actually is, but also for what it implies: the fact that the trio has been considered to connote Frenchness and the essence of *chanson* is not only an appreciation of the singers as artists, it is also an appreciation of what 'Frenchness' and 'essence of *chanson*' meant to society at a given time. Another essential aspect of the mythical concept here comes into play: its historical and therefore variable dimension. Barthes strongly insists on the historicity of the myth: 'il n'y a aucune fixité dans les concepts mythiques: ils peuvent se faire, s'altérer, se défaire, disparaître complètement. Et c'est précisément parce qu'ils sont historiques, que l'histoire peut très facilement les supprimer' (194). Hence the importance of examining the contingencies surrounding the creation of the myth; in the present context, it is essential to take into account, as Chapter Four will, the state of society in the 1950s and 1960s, including its hopes and

insecurities, in order to understand to what extent the myth Brel-Brassens-Ferré is a myth of Frenchness.

Another aspect of the myth has to be analysed for a clearer understanding of its functioning: its imperative dimension. According to Barthes' theory, 'le mythe a un caractère impératif, interpellatoire: parti d'un concept historique, surgi directement de la contingence [...], c'est *moi* qu'il vient chercher: il est tourné vers moi, je subis sa force intentionnelle, il me somme de recevoir son ambiguïté expansive' (197). A myth, in other words, presumes the cultural disposition and sensitivity of the individual or group that it addresses, and addresses them accordingly. Consequently, it is not so much that we perceive Frenchness in the trio Brel-Brassens-Ferré, but rather that the myth of the trio – a myth which was born in society's discourses on the singers – makes use of ideas and traditions that our cultural disposition recognises as being typically French. Some of these ideas – such as revolt, adventure, individualism, Gallic traditions, or left-wing intellectualism, for example – will be examined in detail in the following chapters.

Barthes explains that the intentional dimension of the myth raises a dilemma: 'ou bien l'intention du mythe est trop obscure pour être efficace, ou bien elle est trop claire pour être crue' (202). But instead of either revealing or suppressing the intention of the concept, the myth actually bypasses the dilemma by *naturalising* the concept:

Nous sommes ici au principe même du mythe: il transforme l'histoire en nature. On comprend maintenant pourquoi, *aux yeux du consommateur de mythes*, l'intention, l'adhominatation du concept peut rester manifeste sans paraître pour autant intéressée: la cause qui fait proférer la parole mythique est parfaitement explicite, mais elle est aussitôt transie dans une nature; elle n'est pas lue comme mobile, mais comme raison. [...] pour le lecteur de mythe [...] tout se passe comme si l'image provoquait *naturellement* le concept, comme si le signifiant *fondait* le signifié. (202-203)

What this means in the case of the present study of Brel, Brassens, and Ferré is that although the relation between the myth of the trio and the concept of Frenchness is artificial and motivated, it is perceived as a natural relation; in other words, while

discourses on the trio *intentionally* signify Frenchness, the intention is simply interpreted as a natural relation of cause and effect.

In order to identify the perspectives from which the trio might be analysed for a better understanding of its functioning as a social phenomenon, two essential characteristics of the Barthesian myth have to be highlighted. The first one is that a myth is always a discourse: 'Le mythe ne se définit pas par l'objet de son message, mais par la façon dont il le professe' (181); which means, for example, that the trio Brel-Brassens-Ferré is not a myth because the singers actually embody Frenchness or '*grande*' *chanson*, but because they were *interpreted* as representatives of *chanson*. The second characteristic is that a myth is not *per se* its own purpose: it puts itself at the service of the idea (or 'concept', in Barthes' terminology) that has motivated its creation. As Barthes explains, the concept 'est déterminé, il est à la fois historique et intentionnel' (191); this means that the concept (in the case of this study, the idea of '*grande*' *chanson* or of its Frenchness) exists *before* the myth and is influenced by the historical context.

Barthes' theories, therefore, offer the possibility of examining the trio Brel-Brassens-Ferré from a new perspective. They highlight the fact that the sign at the origin of the myth (the trio) and the mythical concept (the Frenchness of *chanson*) have been *intentionally* associated by society to form a myth (the trio as a representation of Frenchness); they also explain that the mythical concept exists before the myth. This means that it will be consequently useless to look for reasons for the association of the singers with the concept of Frenchness in the singers themselves or in their works: a more fruitful approach will indeed be to focus on the 'intentionality' of the connexion by examining the public's *interpretation* of the trio in order to identify the aspects of the

singers' works which have been considered to echo ideas or images associated with the notion of 'Frenchness'.

Jean-Pierre Leloir's photograph of the 1969 interview provides a useful example of the approach that this study will adopt. Jacques Vassal, quoted above, observed that the photograph was popular because it represented, through the three singers, 'un certain anticonformisme, une révolte profonde même, propre à soulever les cœurs et les esprits';⁶⁵ and it is true that, for most French people, this photograph has liberal political connotations and evokes the essence of the left-wing artist and intellectual. Nothing on the photograph, however, refers directly to revolt, anarchism or left-wing ideas. The photograph represents three men, casually and unostentatiously dressed, having an apparently friendly conversation around a table; they are being recorded but seem almost unaware of the microphones, they are all smoking and drinking beer. If the photograph evokes revolt and nonconformism, then, it is because the viewer projects these notions into it. The three artists are all known to be somehow emblematic of a rebellious individualism and an undisciplined Epicureanism, and although this is not obvious on the photograph, it still contains clues which, if they are actively interpreted as symbols of nonconformism or Epicureanism, can be deemed to mirror the deeper personalities of the singers.

As will be observed in the following chapters, some of the key elements of the singers' popularity were their simplicity, their disinterested kindness, their manliness, their disregard for convention, and their relentless quest for happiness, pleasure and adventure. All these elements, if looked for, can be evoked by Leloir's photograph: the singers smile and listen to each other, which can be interpreted as a sign of complicity between them and of kindness, their simple clothes and relaxed appearance can be seen

⁶⁵ Vassal, *Léo Ferré: l'enfant millénaire*, p.9.

as a sign of the fact that they are oblivious to their celebrity, and the fact that they drink and smoke excessively can be a sign that they enjoy life simply. The continuing popularity of the photograph, then, has really relied on the public's interpretation of it, and more precisely on the ways in which the public has associated it with notions – or concepts – that have become the very purpose of the mythicisation of the photograph. Leloir, therefore, has arguably played a significant part in the mythicisation of the trio and in its longevity, for by making public a tangible representation of it, he provided several generations with the possibility of finding their own resonance in the trio Brel-Brassens-Ferré. In fact, Leloir immortalised the essence of many artists from the 1960s onwards, and his photographs of Brel on stage are another example of how he often managed to capture the details that epitomised the artist: on many of his Brel photographs there is sweat, symbolising hard work and manliness, there are sparkling eyes, revealing his passion, and there are awkward gestures that testify to the singer's theatricality and distance him from traditional 'stars'.

Applying Barthes' theories to the trio suggests that the reasons for the systematic association of Brel, Brassens, and Ferré, and their significance, are not to be found in the intrinsic qualities of the singers' works, or in factors directly relating to them. The content, nature, and quality of their works must not, of course, be overlooked; but the creation of the trio, which the present chapter has presented as artificial, might rather be the result of a social intention. As the main basis for their association is that they represent the Frenchness of *chanson*, it would be legitimate to think that the social intention that has motivated the creation of the trio relates to the representation of Frenchness. In order to investigate what the singers actually represented and why they have remained a key cultural symbol, it will therefore be necessary to focus on how

they were interpreted rather than on what they and their works actually meant; in other words, Brel, Brassens, Ferré, and their work have to be explored in relation to the public rather than as an independent entity.

The following chapters will analyse the public's interpretation of the singers' personalities and works, as well as the 'concepts' (according to Barthes' definition) with which they were associated and which they were seen to embody. Although this study is not a Barthesian analysis of the myth Brel-Brassens-Ferré, it borrows Barthes' conception of the myth as a 'sign' associated with a 'concept', and its structure draws on such a conception. Chapter Two will focus on the specificity of the 'sign' Brel-Brassens-Ferré – notably the oral dimension of the singers' work – and will investigate the elements that must be taken into consideration when interpreting this sign. Chapter Three will interpret the sign by tracing the public profiles of each of the singers. Finally, Chapter Four will focus on the ideas and ideals – or, to refer back to Barthes, the 'concepts' – which were associated with the 'sign' (the trio) to create the myth of Brel-Brassens-Ferré as an embodiment of Frenchness.

This study will not, therefore, focus primarily on the works and lives of Brel, Brassens, and Ferré. Previous studies have analysed the cultural significance of one or more of the singers, as did Sara Poole's or Chris Tinker's, or of French singer-songwriters in general, like Peter Hawkins';⁶⁶ some have also examined how popular music and *chanson* testify to a broader cultural influence and reflect essential aspects of social history, which is notably the case in David Looseley's latest book on popular

⁶⁶ Peter Hawkins, *Chanson: The French Singer-Songwriter from Aristide Bruant to the Present Day* (England and USA: Ashgate, 2000); Sara Poole, *Brassens: Chansons* (London: Grant & Cutler, 2000), and *Brel and Chansons: a Critical Appreciation* (Dallas, Lanham, Boulder, New York and Oxford: University Press of America, 2004); Chris Tinker, *Georges Brassens and Jacques Brel: Personal and Social Narratives in Post-War French Chanson* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005).

music in France.⁶⁷ This thesis examines an artificial cultural icon – the trio Brel-Brassens-Ferré – in order to determine the significance of the trio as an emblem of national identity. The following chapters will identify the different elements involved in the construction of a myth felt to be representative of French society at a given time, thereby offering a popular perspective on the ways in which France of the 1950s and 1960s perceived its own cultural identity.

Using a broadly cultural studies approach, this study focuses on three main fields: popular music, the mediation of public figures, and the sociology of modern popular myths. Popular music, however, is approached in a non music specialist perspective: since this thesis examines the popular interpretation of *chanson*, its interest lies not in the quality and specificities of the music itself, but in the contact zone between the public, the performer, and the music; it focuses, as the next chapter is now going to illustrate, on music/*chanson* as an oral genre rather than an artistic creation.

⁶⁷ David L. Looseley, *Popular Music in Contemporary France* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2003).

Chapter 2: How to analyse *chanson*? Theoretical Approaches

The first chapter of this thesis has demonstrated that traditional song analysis alone – that is to say the study of lyrics, music, and singers – fails to provide an explanation for the systematic association of Brel, Brassens, and Ferré. It has also observed that since its creation, the trio has been loaded with meanings, connotations, and a significance that transcends the field of traditional song analysis; in particular, the three singers have been interpreted as the embodiments of a typically French worldview, whether it be within the domain of intellectual and artistic activity or within the ideological conflicts between modernisation and tradition, or between Americanisation and the promotion of French national culture.

Chapter One has also examined the trio in the light of Barthes' semiotic approach and has established that one of the essential conditions that had to be met in order to decipher the myth Brel-Brassens-Ferré was to focus on society's *intentional* association of the trio with the concept of 'Frenchness' – the term 'Frenchness' seems a satisfactory shortcut to refer to the typically French attitudes mentioned in the previous chapter, and one flexible enough to potentially incorporate other such attitudes and ideals.

It is obvious that to examine the *intentional* association of the trio with the notion of Frenchness, traditional song analysis will prove inadequate. Traditional analysis focuses on various aspects of songs, such as the lyrics, the music, the author, or the singer; the audience and the socioeconomic context, as well as the influence that they can have on the creation or performance of a song, are also increasingly taken into account. But in order to fully understand how society can *intentionally* play a part in the creation and evolution of an artist and his/her work through the interpretation of that

work, it is essential to investigate the aspects of song that leave space for a connection with the audience and that consequently allow (or possibly even require) the public or society to engage with the song and the artist. The aim of this chapter, then, is to examine in detail the nature of song – insisting on the specificity of the *chanson* genre – and the conditions of song and music reception in the period relevant to this study, the 1950s and 1960s, in order to define the type of song analysis that will be required to decipher the myth Brel-Brassens-Ferré.

A – The nature of song

1) The oral dimension

The heterogeneous nature of song has made its study problematic. As academic interest in popular songs has developed, the primary focus has been on the various elements at stake in a song, such as the lyrics, the music, the performance, or the artist, and subsequently, emphasis has been placed on the importance of the interactions between each of these elements, thereby revealing the reductive effects of a unilateral approach. In his seminal 1977 essay ‘Le grain de la voix’, Roland Barthes had denounced the linguistic poverty of music criticism: ‘Si l’on examine la pratique courante de la critique musicale [...], on voit bien que l’œuvre (ou son exécution) n’est jamais traduite que sous la catégorie linguistique la plus pauvre: l’adjectif.’¹ In an attempt to identify the reasons for such a deficiency, Barthes advanced the view that discourses about music – and in particular about song – too often overlooked its true nature: not enough attention

¹ Roland Barthes, ‘Le grain de la voix’, in *Musique en jeu*, vol.9, 1972, p.57.

was given to the materiality and the immediacy of music, or, in other terms, to its orality.

Although the orality of song is now increasingly taken into account, most critics, when analysing popular songs, still feel the need to confess the imperfection of their approaches, as if the nature of song itself made it impossible to grasp in its entirety. As far as the *chanson* genre is concerned, the situation is even more problematic, since it is a genre in which the text – which tends to be judged with reference to the written – plays a greater part than in most other forms of song. By investigating the orality of song, the aim of this chapter is not to solve the problem but to justify its centrality in the study of *chanson*, and thereby to legitimise the part played by subjectivity in the appreciation of songs and singers.

As Peter Hawkins rightly observes when answering his own question ‘How do you write about *chanson*?’, ‘most of the approaches that have so far been deployed seem limited or partial, often missing an important aspect of the hybrid form that is *chanson*’.² Indeed, the significance of many *chanson* authors lies beyond their songs, their lyrics, their music, and their performance skills; and whatever approach is used to argue the significance of a *chanson* author, it always seems to leave a space for the arbitrary. This study does not aim to eliminate the arbitrary, but rather to investigate it, in order to understand better the potentially fecund lines of study which the analysis of song can open up in the discussion of cultural identity.

In order to do so, this chapter proposes to apply to *chanson* medievalist Paul Zumthor’s approach to oral poetry. As a medievalist, Zumthor does not dissociate, in his approach to oral poetry, the artistic interests of the texts from their social interest. It is typical of a medievalist’s approach to be both literary and sociological; and such a

² Peter Hawkins, *Chanson: The French Singer-Songwriter from Aristide Bruant to the Present Day* (Aldershot and Burlington, USA: Ashgate, 2000), p.15.

dual approach is very relevant to the study of *chanson*, since *chanson* is a genre which, because of the importance of its lyrics, draws on literature, and whose significance consistently reveals the role of the arbitrary in socio-cultural phenomena.

a – Song as oral poetry

Lyrics are a significant component of songs, especially of 1950s *chanson*, and words are basic communication tools which provide a reasonably straightforward source of meaning. They seem therefore an obvious starting point for any analysis of song. The question, however, is how to study lyrics. Some critics, depending on the focus of their research, have chosen to base their studies on the published texts of song lyrics. Lucienne Cantaloube-Ferrieu for example, justifies her analysis by saying that ‘la critique littéraire dissèque aussi le chant poétique et parle du théâtre loin de la scène, dans le seul souvenir du jeu dramatique’ and asks: ‘Qu’est-ce que la petite chanson, divertissement oral de masse, a de commun avec la littérature écrite, hors le support des mots?’³ Although this is a perfectly legitimate approach given that Cantaloube’s perspective is a purely literary one, it implies the treatment of song lyrics as poetry, and more precisely, as written poetry. The debate over whether song lyrics should be considered as poetry has been ongoing for decades; but relying on it to justify one’s approach risks assimilating the opposition written/spoken (or sung) with the opposition poetry/non-poetry. Perhaps, then, a more fruitful distinction would be one between written poetry and oral poetry, as defined by Zumthor in *Introduction à la poésie orale*.

Zumthor starts by defining the notion of ‘poetic’ very broadly, significantly rejecting the criterion of quality: ‘J’écarte, pour son excès d’imprécision, et en dépit

³ Lucienne Cantaloube-Ferrieu, *Chanson et Poésie des années 30 aux années 60: Trenet, Brassens, Ferré... ou les ‘enfants naturels’ du surréalisme* (Paris: Niset, 1981), p.9.

d'une certaine tendance actuelle, le critère de qualité. Est poésie, est littérature, ce que le public, lecteurs ou auditeurs, reçoit pour tel, y percevant une intention non exclusivement pragmatique.'⁴ He also observes that all poetic discourse is composed of what he calls a 'basis' or 'document', which includes all the primary structures of discourse (voice or paper and pen, language) and a 'poetic level' or 'monument'; the latter is characterised by a *textual* structuring (that is to say a structuring of the language) and a *modal* structuring (graphic representation in the case of a written piece, vocal representation in the case of orality) (p.39). He explains that the distribution of *textual* and *modal* structures in the constitution of the 'monument' varies greatly in written and oral poetry: 'le textuel domine l'écrit; le modal, les arts de la voix'(p.39). So, according to Zumthor, written and oral poetry have a common intention, they have common components, but they use these components differently.

Zumthor's definition of oral poetry is extremely wide and flexible, and one could argue that according to his criteria any oral production without a purely communicative purpose may be called poetry, whether it be an opera, a rock song or a nursery rhyme. Nevertheless, his insistence on the different 'modal structures' between written and oral poetry as well as his reluctance to take into account the notion of quality, present far more productive lines of enquiry. Firstly, he dismisses the hierarchical obstacles between two different types of poetry (written and oral), and secondly, he locates the action of the voice in oral production and establishes it as an integral part of the oral poem. Analysing songs through these criteria therefore has the great advantage of taking into consideration many aspects of orality which risk being overlooked by other approaches, notably its social function: 'le texte poétique oral, dans la mesure où, par la voix qui le porte, il engage un corps, répugne plus que le texte écrit

⁴ Paul Zumthor, *Introduction à la poésie orale* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil Collection poétique, 1983), p.38.

à toute analyse qui le dissocierait de sa fonction sociale et de la place qu'elle lui confère dans la communauté réelle' (39-40).

Zumthor's achievement is to highlight the tendency, in western culture, to use criteria of the written to judge the spoken or the sung; according to him, some of the difficulties we experience in analysing oral poetry come from the fact that our culture is founded on the written. Zumthor takes the example of African oral poetry to illustrate the absence of subordination of the oral to the written: African poetry uses images that only connect together when uttered and grasped by the audience.

La rencontre, en performance, d'une voix et d'une écoute, exige entre ce qui se prononce et ce qui s'entend une coïncidence presque parfaite des dénnotations, des connotations principales, des nuances associatives. La coïncidence est fictive; mais cette fiction constitue le propre de l'art poétique oral; elle rend l'échange possible, en dissimulant l'incompréhensibilité résiduelle.[...] D'où, pour l'observateur, l'impression parfois que l'aspect verbal de l'œuvre orale est moins soigné que son aspect prosodique ou musical: point de vue de gens d'écriture. (127)

In themselves, Zumthor's theories do not help eliminate the difficulty of grasping a song in its entirety, but, by contextualising oral poetry in western culture, they advance a more profound understanding of it. They might, for example, provide an explanation as to why we are culturally unable to accept the arbitrary as a solid argument to justify the claim that Brassens' work is significant, whereas it might be acceptable from the perspective of oral culture. The arbitrary is a notion that must of course be more precisely defined; as this chapter will explain below, it partly comes from the listening subject – and can therefore also be referred to as *subjectivity* – and partly from the socio-cultural conditioning of individuals – and can therefore also be referred to as a *socio-cultural arbitrary*. Indeed, the notion of 'fictive coincidence' discussed by Zumthor could easily provide part of the definition of the arbitrary involved in a listener's appreciation of a song. If we bear in mind the different elements involved in the making of the 'monument' (according to Zumthor's definition) in written and oral

poetry, and if we recognise the supremacy, in songs, of vocal representation in contrast to textual structure, the indescribable nature of what has so far been referred to as ‘the arbitrary’ seems far less problematic.

If, therefore, we want to grasp the meaning and significance of the songs of Brel, Brassens and Ferré, we have to free ourselves from literary constraints and accept the poetic validity of immediate, non-textual elements, such as vocal representation, charisma, or the persuasiveness of the singer. In fact, this has already largely been implicitly recognised, since the description of the ‘poetic’ qualities of a *chanson* often refers to the non-written element that makes the connection between song and listener a successful one. Interestingly, however, despite many critics having recognised the poetic validity of these non-written elements, this recognition is still considered to be an unusual attitude to have towards *chanson*, and an attitude demanded not by the specificity of the genre but by the specificity of the artist. Edith Piaf, for example, has always been celebrated for the poetry of her performance rather than the poetry of her lyrics; Boris Vian famously said that she could have moved her audience by simply singing the phone book. In his thesis about ‘singing poets’, Dimitris Papanikolaou observed that ‘with Brel’s performance, the scrutiny normally expected from poetry readers is disapproved: poetry has become a general atmosphere’.⁵ The case of the singer-songwriter Barbara is noteworthy in this regard because critics who have tried to define the characteristic which made her fit in the category ‘poet-singers’ always mention her voice as one of her main poetic features. Whereas the poetic dimension of the *text*, independent of performance, has been repeatedly investigated in the cases of most singer-songwriters of the period, in the case of Barbara, it has never been

⁵ Dimitris Papanikolaou, *Singing Poets: Literature and Popular Music in France and Greece* (London: Legenda, 2007), p.46.

dissociated from her voice. Critics always seem to have felt that Barbara's work was poetic, without always being able to justify it in terms of the literariness of her lyrics (the same could be said of some of Brel's songs). Peter Hawkins has perfectly summed up the essence of Barbara's poetic dimension: 'An instantly recognisable voice and style, a very particular atmosphere, a hypersensitive, mysterious feminine universe which is Barbara's contribution to the otherwise male-dominated universe of the post-war *chanson* tradition of the singer-songwriter'.⁶ What Hawkins emphasises here is the fact that whether or not the poetic dimension of Barbara's songs is acknowledged, poetry seems to *emanate* from her. Zumthor identified a similar issue concerning Brel:

nul ne nierait, je pense, que Brel ait été un grand poète: mais *nous* le sentons tel, et dans son *chant*. Le terme *chant* renvoie à un mode d'existence esthétique qui n'est pas du même ordre que ce que nous nommons couramment 'poésie'; *nous* renvoie à notre culture, historiquement et spatialement déterminée. (128)

In other words, the poetry of Brel's work does not exist through the lyrics but through his oral performance of them. But Zumthor also underlines here a certain cultural determination of poetic perception. He identifies the fact that the recognition of oral poetry appeals to what we might call the cultural arbitrary: many French-speakers feel that Brel is a poet, but this poetic feeling is not justifiable in terms of what we traditionally call 'poetry'. Consequently, the listener has to accept his/her feeling as sole evidence, for, if it is shared by an important number of French people, it must be a legitimate expression of what that culture perceives as poetic. In the perspective of a study of the trio Brel-Brassens-Ferré, in the creation of which the cultural arbitrary has arguably played an essential part, Zumthor's theory opens potentially fecund lines of study in the domain of the popular perception of national identity. However, it is important to highlight that the 'cultural arbitrary' is a generic and flexible notion that relates to an indefinable idea of Frenchness, and that varies according to many factors,

⁶ Hawkins, p.150.

notably social ones. In the same way as there is not *one* French mentality, there is no clearly defined ‘French cultural arbitrary’; and a well-educated middle-class person is highly unlikely to judge the work of Brel, for example, in the same way as a person who possesses a lesser degree of social and cultural capital – to use Bourdieu’s terminology.

The same cultural arbitrary can be expected to play a part in the categorisation of songs: we may feel, for example, that there is more poetry in Brel’s work than in Johnny Hallyday’s, but arguments to justify why may be difficult to find; and the example of Hallyday’s cover of *Ne me quitte pas* proves that the quality of the lyrics is not, on its own, what makes a song poetic. Critics, journalists, or even the general public have used terms like ‘chanson littéraire’, ‘chanson à texte’, or ‘chanson poétique’ to distinguish between what are often perceived as quality songs and less prestigious variety songs. Louis-Jean Calvet argues that cabaret singers, because of the lack of space on stage, were often limited to being accompanied by nothing but a guitar, so they worked on the text to compensate: ‘C’est ainsi qu’une certaine image de la chanson française commence à circuler [...]. On l’appelle “chanson poétique”, “bonne chanson”, “chanson littéraire”, et surtout “chanson Rive gauche” puisqu’elle s’est principalement développée dans les cabarets de la rive gauche de la Seine.’⁷ This enumeration is interesting as it assimilates ‘bonne’, ‘poétique’ and ‘littéraire’, implying once more that the closer a song is to a written poem, the better its quality; it also disregards the musical qualities of the so-called ‘chansons littéraires’.

If we adopt Zumthor’s theories as a set of working hypotheses, then, terms like ‘chanson littéraire’ or ‘chanson poétique’ soon become meaningless, for calling a song ‘littéraire’ implies judging it from the perspective of ‘gens d’écriture’, and a ‘chanson poétique’ is, if we accept Zumthor’s definition of oral poetry, a pleonasm. It would be

⁷ Louis-Jean Calvet, *Georges Brassens* (Paris: Lieu Commun, 1991), p.130.

wrong, however, to deny the importance of the lyrics in French *chanson*; but instead of classifying songs according to the *quality* of their lyrics, it might be more productive to qualify them according to the degree of what Zumthor has called ‘l’investissement du langage poétique par la musicalité’ (182). The differences which he discerns between different types of oral poetry apply, on a different scale, to different types of songs, from *chanson* to rock songs:

De l’épopée, à travers le lied jusqu’à l’air d’opéra, se produit moins un lent passage de la poésie seule à la pure musique, qu’un investissement progressif du langage poétique par la musicalité. À la limite, le texte devient inaudible, ainsi sur les lèvres [...] de chanteurs de rock. (182)

Zumthor then adds that there are no stages to this movement, it is not gradable, and that each performance requires its own evaluation of the powers it involves; each evaluation depends on several parameters, such as the mode of execution, the expectation of the audience, or cultural habits (182). What this theory illustrates is the imprecision of song classification: all songs are similar in nature, what varies is the degree to which musicality invests the poetic language, but it varies even between two performances of the same song. The theory also emphasises the active power of external circumstances like the expectation of the audience and cultural habits, which stresses once more the cultural significance of the public’s handling of a singer’s performance: the expectation of Brel’s audience, for example, is likely to be different from that of Hallyday’s audience, which invalidates further the criterion of quality already rejected by Zumthor. Besides, as Simon Frith has observed in *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music*, judging a song ‘good’ or ‘bad’ gives more information about the person making the judgement than about the song itself: ‘The marking off of some tracks and genres and artists as “good” and others as “bad” seems to be a necessary part of popular music

pleasure and use; it is a way in which we establish our place in various music worlds and use music as a source of identity.’⁸

So, in fact, what Zumthor’s theories reveal is that the essence of oral poetry is the *functioning* of a discourse, which cannot be based on purely aesthetic criteria. ‘On ne juge la *beauté* (quelque sens que l’on prête à ce mot) qu’en performance.’⁹ In order to investigate the nature of the trio Brel-Brassens-Ferré, then, it is important to focus on the significance of their work ‘in performance’; despite the fact that the lyrics might make sense independently of the performance, what will give them their significance is their social function, that is to say the way in which they establish a connection between what the song is perceived to mean, the audience, and the performer; and one of the main aspects of the connection established by the performance is its immediacy, the physical experience which it represents.

b – Physical dimension of the song

• **Body and voice**

Although the microgroove was introduced in France after the Second World War, Brel, Brassens and Ferré, in common with most song-writers of the time, first became famous through public performance. The three singers always refused to mime to pre-recorded tapes and in Cristiani’s 1969 interview, the three agreed that ‘le disque est un sous-produit de la chanson [...] la chanson a été faite pour être chantée.’¹⁰ To them, singing was not dissociable from the audience, and when they performed, they did seem to

⁸ Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), p.72.

⁹ Zumthor, p.128.

¹⁰ Cristiani and Leloir, *Trois hommes dans un salon: Brel Brassens Ferré* (Paris: Fayard/Editions du Verbe (chorus), 2003) p.18.

interact with the public in more than just one way: they sang, but they also communicated physically, through gestures, looks and facial expressions. What is striking about the articles reviewing the shows of Brel, Brassens and Ferré is the recurrence of physical descriptions of the singers. Their voices were described in very physical terms, and their hands and the tension of their bodies were also often emphasised by journalists. Brassens's moustache, Ferré's hair and Brel's long arms seemed to be an integral part of their shows. The sweat and spit of the performing artists were also often alluded to, as if further to underline their dedicated physical involvement.

This is all consistent with the characterisation of *chanson* authors made by David Looseley in his study of popular music in France in which he points to the 'DIY' dimension of singer-songwriters.¹¹ Obvious signs of physical efforts contribute to the image of the singer-songwriter strenuously working to deliver the best of himself to his audience.¹² Brel consistently told journalists that he was neither a poet nor a great musician: he was a 'petit artisan de la chanson'.¹³ Critics and journalists often compared the singer-songwriters to craftsmen whose sweating was the result of hard work. Sweating is not unusual for a singer, but it is important to remark, however, that singer-songwriters do not sweat in the same way as rock stars; rock stars sweat because they move and dance, whereas singer-songwriters do so as the result of what appears to be a creative effort. Looseley notes that the singer-songwriter 'is usually caught in a single spotlight'¹⁴ which means that his movements are limited. Ferré was a solitary figure on stage, sweating and spitting, but always immobile. Brel was famous for leaving a pool

¹¹ David Looseley, *Popular Music in Contemporary France* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2003), p.78.

¹² As Looseley has observed (as well as Peter Hawkins in *Chanson: The French Singer-Songwriter from Aristide Bruant to the Present Day* (Aldershot and Burlington, USA: Ashgate, 2000)) the singer-songwriter community is almost exclusively masculine (Barbara being the exception which proves the rule). This will be further discussed in Chapter 4.

¹³ Cristiani, p.15.

¹⁴ Looseley, *Popular Music in Contemporary France*, p.78.

of sweat around the microphone after each performance. Brassens' discomfort on stage meant that he did not move; he was described in *Le Monde* as having his foot screwed to his chair,¹⁵ but he was still regularly referred to as a bear 'suant à grosses gouttes'.¹⁶ Physical effort is not, therefore, something that the artist adds to the performance: it contributes to the creation of the performance. And although an analysis of gender imbalance in the world of *chanson* is not the point of this study, it could still be suggested that the analogy between *chanson* and laborious manual work traditionally associated with men might partly explain the strikingly small number of successful women singer-songwriters at the time; not only are women physically less strong than men, but in a conservative – or maybe even male-chauvinistic – society, it would be deemed unsuitable for a woman to appear sweating and spitting in public.

Singing is an act which involves a voice, and a voice is rooted in a body. In 'Le grain de la voix', Barthes suggested that in order to liberate discourses about music from what he called predicative reality (that is to say the almost exclusive use of adjectives to convey music in discourse), it was necessary to reconsider the fringe of contact between music and language. He defined the new fringe of contact which he believed should be the musical object of a song as the 'grain' of the voice, explaining that 'le "grain", ce serait cela: la matérialité du corps parlant sa langue maternelle.'¹⁷ According to Barthes, then, in order to analyse and judge a song, one needs to focus on the contact between music and the physicality of language; in other words, instead of focusing on the emotions expressed by the voice, on whether it is 'sad', 'happy' or 'passionate', one needs to listen for the presence of the body in the singing voice.

As Barthes explained, to judge a song according to whether or not one perceives the 'grain' in a music implied constructing a new 'evaluation table', which would

¹⁵ *Le Monde*, 8 November 1961.

¹⁶ *Les Nouvelles Littéraires* 23 May 1957.

¹⁷ Barthes, 'Le grain de la voix', p.58.

necessarily be individual, 'puisque je suis décidé à écouter mon rapport au corps de celui ou de celle qui chante ou qui joue' (62). Besides, 'cette évaluation se fera sans loi: elle déjouera la loi de la culture mais aussi celle de l'anticulture; elle développera au-delà du sujet toute la valeur qui est cachée derrière "j'aime" ou "je n'aime pas"' (62). According to Barthes, liking or disliking a song is determined by whether or not a physical connection is established *immediately* between singer and listener; and this physical connection will depend on whether or not the listener perceives the 'grain' of the voice, that is to say the materiality of the singer's voice.

What is most striking from the perspective of this study of French *chanson* is the degree to which the 'physicality' of songs seems to have played an important part in the characterisation of the singer-songwriter. Critics' insistence on physical descriptions has already been mentioned, but the voice of a singer-songwriter, of an author of *chanson*, is also usually required to be authentic and physical rather than polished and true. The fact that Barbara's career continued to flourish after her voice had been damaged by throat cancer is telling; despite having lost some of its formal beauty, Barbara's voice, which was reminiscent of her body, remained just as powerful and beautiful to her public. Among Serge Gainsbourg's songs, the ones considered the most poetic or the most outrageous are often those sung with a voice evocative of the body: in *Je suis venu te dire que je m'en vais*, for example, the sound of a body crying is omnipresent, while Jane Birkin's voice in *Je t'aime moi... non plus* is more than sexually suggestive.

In the cases of Brel, Brassens and Ferré, the beauty emanating from the materiality of the voice is illustrated by the positive connotations attributed to the least musical intrusions of the body in their voices. Ferré's voice is described as 'chargée en métal, et jusqu'aux nuances du rauque voire de l'éraillé',¹⁸ a journalist in *Le Monde*

¹⁸ Charles Estienne, *Léo Ferré* (Paris: Seghers, 'poètes d'aujourd'hui' 1962) p.11.

talked about Brassens' 'grosse voix rustaude raclant les r à plein gosier pour dire des choses subtiles, tendres, amères ou drôles'¹⁹, and Clouzet praised the quality of Brel's voice which was not polished like voices from the Conservatoire.²⁰

The positive connotations of imperfect voices illustrated here complement Looseley's description of the 'DIY' singer-songwriter: in his study, he observed in particular that a singer 'must be able to accompany himself, if only in a rudimentary, DIY way, irrespective of musical competence.'²¹ The same could be said of singers' voices: it does not matter if their voices are imperfect, as long as we can hear that they are authentic. And singer-songwriters constantly remind the audience, deliberately or not, that the voice heard is their own. By introducing non-musical elements in their songs, such as sighs and cries, by changing their voices, or by reciting what is expected to be sung, singer-songwriters contribute to drawing the attention to the voice itself. Zumthor pointed out that although speech is the main manifestation of the human voice, it is not the only one;²² when Brel, for example, put on a Belgian accent to sing *Les bonbons* or imitated the noises made by a family eating dinner in *Ces gens-là*, the audience was more aware of the fact that his voice was not just an instrument but also an organ able to make everyday noises. So it seems in fact that in many respects, the musical and vocal competence of a performing singer-songwriter was often less important than a convincing physical presence.

¹⁹ 'Georges Brassens à l'Olympia' Henri Magnan, *Le Monde*, 25.September 1954.

²⁰ Jean Clouzet, *Jacques Brel* (Paris: Seghers, coll. Poètes d'aujourd'hui, 1964); édition augmentée (coll. Poésie et chansons, 1987) p.44.

²¹ Looseley, *Popular Music in Contemporary France*, p.78.

²² Zumthor, p.27.

• Physical communication with the audience

If the performance of a song is physical, then so is its reception by the audience. Brel, Brassens and Ferré did not have exceptional voices, they sometimes made mistakes, forgot their lyrics or were out of tune, but this was actually part of the reason why the public trusted them: they did not cheat. Frith has argued that all pop stars 'are involved in a process of *double enactment*: they enact both a star personality (their image) and a song personality, the role that each lyric requires, and the pop star's art is to keep both acts in play at once'.²³ In the cases of Brel, Brassens and Ferré, the audience was always aware of this 'double enactment', of the fact that behind the performer was the man, forging a form of complicity between himself and his audience. This was even more true when they added jokes referring to real life events which concerned them or when they named themselves in their songs. Commenting on Brassens' performance of his song *La mauvaise réputation*, Christian Hermelin pointed out the importance of the singer's presence in his own songs: 'Enfin, on avait en face de soi, quelqu'un! Être quelqu'un, être "je", voilà ce qui résumerait la recherche des meilleurs. Cela est sans doute la raison qui conduit quelques-uns à glisser discrètement leur signature au coin d'un vers';²⁴ like Brel singing in *Les bonbons* 67 that nobody spoke with a Brussels accent anymore, 'sauf Brel, à la télévision', or Brassens denying in *Le bulletin de santé* that 'Tonton Georges' was dying, or, again, Ferré creating a sarcastic picture of his producer in *Monsieur Barclay*: 'Monsieur Barclay / M'a demandé / Léo Ferré / J'veux un succès'. When Brel, Brassens or Ferré performed, the audience was always aware of what Diderot had identified as the 'paradox' of the comedian, that is to say the performing actor's lucid dividing in two. The complicity which this entailed enhanced

²³ Frith, *Performing Rites*, p.212.

²⁴ Christian Hermelin, *Ces chanteurs que l'on dit poètes* (Paris: L'École, collection Données actuelles, 1970), p.21.

the impression of communion between singer and audience, as for the singer, ‘the “real me” is a promise that lies in the way we hear the voice, just as for a film star the “real” person is to be found in the secret of their look.’²⁵

Because he is immediately and physically involved with his audience, the performing artist is trusted, he conveys sincerity. Zumthor observes that the physical relationship established between speaker and listener through performance provoked ‘l’impression, sur l’auditeur, d’une loyauté moins contestable que dans la communication écrite ou différée, d’une véracité plus probable et plus persuasive.’²⁶ He also points out the importance of the voice in the human unconscious. He explains that although it is easier to recognise the validity of written language, the voice constitutes an archetypal form, a primordial and creative image (12); qualities which contribute to establishing intimacy and trust between the person talking or singing and the person listening. Zumthor also insisted on the phatic function of oral language; he explained that the speaker – and this is therefore also true for the singer – creates a situation of dialogue with the persons to whom he speaks:

L’intention en effet du locuteur qui s’adresse à moi n’est point seulement de me communiquer une information; mais bien d’y parvenir en me provoquant à reconnaître cette intention, à me soumettre à la force illocutoire de sa voix. Ma présence et la sienne dans un même espace nous mettent en position de dialogue, réel ou virtuel. (31)

The physical relationship established through this dialogue requires the listener’s active participation. Simon Frith, developing Barthes’ theory of the grain of the voice, defines further the physical involvement of the audience:

We certainly do hear voices as physically produced: we assign them qualities of throatiness or nasality, and, more specifically, we listen by performing, by reproducing (even if only silently, tentatively) those muscular movements for ourselves, ‘sympathising’ with a singer by pushing the words up against the top of

²⁵ Frith, *Performing Rites*, p.199.

²⁶ Zumthor, p.31.

our mouth when she does. A ‘grained’ voice might, then, simply describe a voice with which, for whatever reasons, we have physical sympathy.²⁷

The notion of ‘physical sympathy’ introduced by Frith emphasises a fundamental element of the public reception of a song: the eliciting (or not) of pleasure. Hearing the body in the voice creates an immediate intimacy with the audience as the performer suddenly finds himself at the disposal of, and subsequently consumed by, his audience; hence the recurrence of the term ‘jouissance’ to define the listener’s experience.

In ‘Le grain de la voix’, Barthes identifies the pleasure of listening as an essential domain to explore in order to comprehend better the social and aesthetic significance of song and music: ‘Si nous réussissions à affiner une certaine “esthétique” de la jouissance musicale, nous accorderions sans doute moins d’importance à la formidable rupture tonale accomplie par la modernité.’²⁸ Zumthor also investigated the pleasure of listening; in particular, his study reminds us that ‘l’écoute autant que la voix’ are ‘fonctions primaires du corps libidinal (dont le langage est la fonction seconde)’ (160). Listening to a voice means listening to and feeling a presence, and it can be experienced physically, beyond the signification of the words uttered. He explained that poetry aspired to free itself from semantic constraints and that contrary to written poetry which restrains such aspiration, oral poetry ‘en accueille les fantasmes et tente de leur donner forme; d’où les universels procédés de rupture du discours: phrases absurdes, répétitions accumulées jusqu’à l’épuisement du sens, séquences phoniques non lexicales, pures vocalises. La motivation culturelle varie; l’effet demeure’ (160).

Abandoning oneself to the pure pleasure of listening to a voice and a music, as Zumthor describes, plays an important part in the public reception of all of Brel, Brassens and Ferré’s songs, but it is even more fundamental in songs whose lyrics or underpinning stories are obscure or do not strike the listener as particularly poetic. For

²⁷ Frith, *Performing Rites*, p.192.

²⁸ Barthes, ‘Le grain de la voix’, p.63.

example, critics examining the poetic dimension of Brel or Brassens' songs sometimes struggle to qualify accurately songs like *La valse à mille temps* or *La cane de Jeanne*, which are undeniably considered to be masterpieces but whose lyrics seem to lack substance. Patrick Baton, in his study of Brel, recognises the predominance of musicality in the lyrics of *La valse à mille temps*, but instead of insisting on the physical effects the song produces in its audience, he calls it a 'canular': '*La valse à mille temps* est une énorme pièce montée, au baroquisme outrancier, comparable à celles qu'aime construire Ionesco: la phrase semble atteinte d'une monstrueuse cancérisation, acquiert peu à peu son autonomie, dès lors échappe à son auteur et se combine à ses voisines sans que la logique intervienne.'²⁹ Another striking example is Ferré's *La mémoire et la mer*. It is one of his most famous and popular songs, and yet it is incomprehensible to his audience. Ferré himself puzzled over its success in an interview with Françoise Travelet:

À propos de cette chanson que je chante depuis que je l'ai écrite, il se passe une chose extraordinaire et inexplicable: l'engouement du public. Pourtant il n'est pas possible qu'il la comprenne parce que c'est une poésie à décrypter et, pour la lire, il faut avoir la grille de ma vie. Si quelqu'un me connaît, il comprend tout, mot après mot. S'il ne connaît pas ma vie, tous les mots lui échappent.³⁰

The pleasure experienced by the audience cannot, therefore, be intellectual. As Frith observes, 'in responding to a song, to a sound, we are drawn [...] into affective and emotional alliances.'³¹ The pleasure is therefore affective, physical, brought about by the contact between words, music and a voice, and felt in a body, regardless of signification, 'à la manière de ces adolescents français que j'entendais chanter une chanson américaine à la mode sans comprendre un mot d'anglais.'³²

²⁹ Patrick Baton, *Jacques Brel, une œuvre* (Bruxelles: Éditions Labor, 1990), p.35.

³⁰ Françoise Travelet, *Dis-donc, Ferré...* (Monaco: La mémoire et la mer, 2001), pp.30-31.

³¹ Frith, *Performing Rites*, p.273.

³² Zumthor, p.161.

The singers themselves experience performance as a physical communication with the public, and comparisons between performance and prostitution were not unusual in interviews with Brel and Ferré. In the 1969 interview, Ferré declared that he had the same profession as prostitutes, to which Brel added that: 'elles sont aussi artistes que nous, et on est aussi putains qu'elles.'³³ Although Brel and Ferré never developed the idea any further, their statements remain illuminating for they illustrate one of Barthes's reflections in 'Le grain de la voix': examining the values behind the statements 'I like' or 'I don't like' a song, he observed that 'les chanteurs et les chanteuses, notamment, viendront se ranger dans deux catégories que l'on pourrait dire prostituives puisqu'il s'agit de choisir ce qui ne me choisit pas'.³⁴ Singer-songwriters indeed put themselves in a vulnerable position; they physically involve themselves in performance, without knowing how the audience will respond or if it will connect, which means that they always run the risk of making fools of themselves and being humiliated. The singers' success does not, therefore, only depend on themselves: it is also dependent on the public and on whether or not it will interpret them in a positive manner.

Frith explains that the performing artist 'holds in tension' the private and the public. This is because:

In most public performances the body is, in fact, subject to a kind of external control, the motivation provided by a score or a script or a routinised social situation, which acts as a safety net for performer and audience alike. It is this safety net which the performance artist abandons, and one can therefore conclude that the essence of performance art is, in the end, embarrassment, a constant sense of the inappropriate. If, in conventional theatre, one is embarrassed only when someone forgets a line or is suddenly 'out of character', in performance art one is on the edge of embarrassment all the time because the performer is not 'in character' to begin with.³⁵

³³ Cristiani, p.60.

³⁴ Barthes, 'Le grain de la voix', p.62.

³⁵ Frith, *Performing Rites*, p.206.

This control exerted by the public over the singer's performance also means that 'there is always a gap between what is meant (the body directed from the inside) and what is read (the body interpreted from the outside)'.³⁶

The gap between what is meant and what is read is precisely where the subjectivity of the appreciation of a song has its roots. The control that the audience exerts over the performance and over the artist in general is what enables it to project its needs and its vision of the world onto a song. In the 1969 interview, Brel defined the artist as somebody who only managed to say publicly what a normal person would say casually to his partner, in the evening.³⁷ What is fundamental in Brel's statement is that it emphasises the fact that the artist, and in our case the singer, does not say anything extraordinary: he/she uses everyday elements as the material for his/her art, and in Frith's terms, uses 'ordinary language put to extraordinary use'.³⁸ Chapter Four will insist further on the significance of the everyday and the familiar in the singers' work, but it can already be highlighted that the material used by the singer is therefore accessible to the audience, which increases the control it has over it, and which itself increases the risks of the singer being misinterpreted, for the audience is more likely to add its own meanings to the song, or even appropriate it. Indeed, Frith insists on the fact that when analysing a song, an analysis of *words* is useless: what is required is an analysis of *words in performance*.³⁹ He illustrates the idea by using the example of people or organisations who appropriate a song only for a slogan, regardless of the actual meaning of the full lyrics. This is interesting in relation to Ferré's *Les Anarchistes* for example, or *Ni Dieu ni Maître*. The latter song is effectively a song against the death penalty, but because of the repetition of 'Ni Dieu ni Maître' in the

³⁶ Frith, *Performing Rites*, p.206.

³⁷ Cristiani, p.30.

³⁸ Frith, *Performing Rites*, p.168.

³⁹ Frith, *Performing Rites*, p.166.

song, it has been considered by some as an anarchist slogan. The example of Brel's *Les Bourgeois* is also significant; it is usually remembered more for its famous 'Les bourgeois, c'est comme les cochons' rather than for the criticism it makes of people who, as they grow older, forget the values of their youth.

Artists themselves can also be the victims of misinterpretation, particularly when the material used in their songs is controversial or political. The audience sometimes reads too much into an artist's work; instead of accepting the immediacy of the performance, the public can try to give it a moral dimension. Although Frith notes that judging some artists as 'good' and others as 'bad' suggests that 'aesthetic and ethical judgements [were] tied together'⁴⁰ he also warns that the *experience* of the performance is purely aesthetic: 'The truth of a feeling is an aesthetic truth, not a moral one; it can only be judged formally, as a matter of gestural grace. "Sincerity", in short, cannot be measured by searching for what lies *behind* the performance; if we are moved by a performer we are moved by what we *immediately* hear and see.'⁴¹

Once a song has been performed, however, it is out of the control of its author, and nothing prevents the audience from appropriating it and making assumptions about the motivations behind it. This insistence on songs provoking a purely aesthetic experience will be fundamental in the study of the celebrity of characters like Brel, Brassens and Ferré, who were always reluctant to justify what they said in their songs. They considered their songs to be self-sufficient entities whose only aim was to give pleasure, to provoke an aesthetic experience. This is possibly why, although they often sang about women, they found it irrelevant to discuss whether or not they were misogynists; in the same way that debates about who inspired Brel to write *Ne me quitte*

⁴⁰ Frith, *Performing Rites*, p.72.

⁴¹ Frith, *Performing Rites*, p.215.

pas are irrelevant. The public's constant need to look behind the song and to make its presumed motivations fit their own needs, was particularly influential on Ferré's career, as he often used names of famous characters or politicians to symbolise oppressive authority, whereas Brel and Brassens never really wrote what were perceived as political songs. This, as the following chapter will examine in further detail, greatly contributed to Ferré's work being misunderstood and manipulated by his audience.

The significance of Brel, Brassens, and Ferré, then, cannot be explained solely in terms of the quality of their lyrics and music: it also has to be explained in terms of the social function of their works and their personae. What Zumthor's theories have revealed is that in the study of an oral text, aesthetic functions cannot be dissociated from social functions. Although song, and *chanson* in particular, has common points with literature, it is still a genre which is inherently social. Because of the nature of the connection established between singer and audience during a performance, song represents a coming to power of the public, it is subjected to the control of society. Another essential aspect of the nature of songs and of its subjection to society is the fact that the genre itself has cultural and social connotations which cannot be disregarded and which can also influence the way in which singers are comprehended by the public.

2) Song and heritage

a – Song and its resonance

Besides being a physical link between an individual and a public, song, by its very nature, is also a link between an audience and a particular form of cultural traditions.

Although this could be said of any other form of art, song is a genre which, because of its oral dimension and popular origins, relies more than others on resonance and tradition. Cantaloube-Ferrieu, drawing on Genette's definition of the *topos*, explains that: 'La chanson appartient à ces "genres dits 'inférieurs', et qu'il faudrait plutôt dire *fondamentaux*", où "la part du *topos*", pour reprendre comme G. Genette le terme de la rhétorique ancienne, est nettement la "plus grande." Sans cesse, en chanson, "la personnalité créatrice" sollicite ce "trésor des sujets et des formes qui constituent le bien commun de la tradition et de la culture.'"⁴²

Adorno, analysing the different stages of recognition in popular music, explained that recognition was actually the principle of enjoyment. He identified five stages of recognition. The first one is the stage of vague remembrance; the second one is the moment of actual identification; the third one is a connecting reaction consisting partly of 'the revelation to the listener that his apparently isolated, individual experience of a particular song is a collective experience'; the fourth stage is when the listener 'Feels a sort of triumph in the split second during which he is capable of identifying something'; and the final stage is characterised by a 'tendency to transfer the gratification of ownership to the object itself and to attribute to it, in terms of like, preference or objective quality, the enjoyment of ownership which one has attained'.⁴³ Essentially, what Adorno's theory suggests is that 'recognition' and 'identification' are important factors in the public's enjoyment of a song, which means that all the elements – whether in the music or in the lyrics – that might strike a familiar chord with the listener might thereby contribute to the popularity and success of the song.

⁴² Cantaloube-Ferrieu, p.194 quoting Gérard Genette, 'Structuralisme et critique littéraire' in *Figures* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), p.162.

⁴³ T.W. Adorno, 'On Popular Music', in *Studies of Philosophy and Social Science*, vol.9, (New York: Institute of Social Research, 1941) pp.35-36.

Chapter Four will develop further the importance of the familiar within the specificity of the *chanson* genre; however, it can for the moment be observed that any song, because it is orally expressed, needs to be grasped in the moment of its performance; this is why it is more efficient if some of its structures, both in the lyrics and the music, are reminiscent of a cultural background which will be familiar to all the members of the audience. Besides, if the song is to last, it needs to be easily remembered and recreated. This explains why, as Zumthor observed, ‘le trait constant et peut-être universellement définitoire de la poésie orale est la récurrence de [...] toute espèce de répétition ou de parallélisme.’⁴⁴ Recurrence and parallelism can be at work within the song itself, through a chorus for example, or within the wider scope of cultural heritage, through the borrowing of topics, images or structures from songs from earlier periods. This illustrates, as Jean-Claude Klein argued, the influence of institutions like the church and school on the way in which an individual will later perceive the reminiscence of a song:

C’est là, sur les bancs de la maternelle, que nous apprenons les chansons qui deviennent *de facto* l’alphabet de base, mélodique et poétique, d’un peuple, la grille de lecture commune avec laquelle on appréciera ensuite la production du marché, c’est-à-dire la chanson patrimoniale vivante de demain. Dans notre spectre, ces institutions [...] assurent le double rôle de lieu de transmission d’une mémoire collective déjà constituée et de musée, emmagasinant les œuvres en cours de sélection.⁴⁵

As Chapter Four will examine in further detail, echoes of childhood catechism and education are omnipresent in the works of Brel, Brassens and Ferré, whether it be through references to priests, Mass, Latin and history classes, or La Fontaine’s poems. From the perspective of our study, it is therefore essential not to consider these references only for their thematic significance, but also for their *resonant* qualities: Brel, Brassens and Ferré used a language which their audience understood perfectly, for

⁴⁴ Zumthor, p.141.

⁴⁵ Jean-Claude Klein, *Florilège de la chanson française* (Paris: Bordas ‘Les Compacts’ series No. 17, 1990), p.11.

the mythology they used was the one with which most children of the 1920s and 1930s had been brought up. In the 1969 interview, Cristiani asked Brel, Brassens and Ferré what God represented for them; Brassens, after having made clear that he was a non-believer, explained that he often mentioned God in his songs ‘mais uniquement pour qu’on comprenne ce que je veux dire. Parce qu’on chante pour des gens qui y croient.’⁴⁶ So words, themes and images should be considered for what they mean immediately, but it is important that they should also be understood as artefacts meant to maximise chances of connection with the audience. As Frith rightly observes, all musicians and singers are ‘faced with the same problems in deciding whether their music is any good or not,’⁴⁷ and one of the ways to do so is to verify whether the audience like their music or not. Singers like Brel, Brassens or Ferré, therefore, not only aimed to create good songs, they also aimed to make the audience feel comfortable and familiar with them.

The challenge which the artist faces is therefore to be creative and innovative, while at the same time appealing to his audience’s sense of cultural resonance. This is precisely one of Brassens’ greatest achievements: although his songs are in many ways revolutionary, they still create a comfortable atmosphere of accessible tradition. His songs seem to manipulate the audience into hearing in them the resonance of a common past, regardless of whether this past is real or not. Cantaloube-Ferrieu even goes as far as to say that ‘en réunissant une sorte de patrimoine spirituel, en l’enrichissant subtilement, de chanson en chanson, par des emprunts prudents, *il dote a posteriori le genre chanté d’un passé déjà littéraire* puisque s’y entremêlent souvenirs de source populaire et réminiscences savantes.’⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Cristiani and Leloir, p.48.

⁴⁷ Frith, *Performing Rites*, p.45.

⁴⁸ Cantaloube-Ferrieu, p.394 (Italics added).

If songs are reminiscent of a cultural background, they also contribute to its creation, and more generally, to the creation of a cultural identity. This chapter has so far examined the relationship between the artist and the audience, but one should not forget that the members of the audience also communicate between themselves and share a common experience. Frith explains that ‘many areas of popular culture [...] provide keys to the ways in which we, as individuals, present ourselves to the world. But music is especially important for our sense of ourselves because of its unique emotional intensity. [...] Music, we could say, provides us with an intensely subjective sense of being sociable.’⁴⁹ In the context of this study, which aims, among other things, to understand the motivations that led the public of Brel, Brassens, and Ferré to mythicise the trio, it will be important to take into account all the elements that contribute to the creation of a ‘sociable’ group around a singer; and if the physical and emotional involvement of the listener mentioned by Frith plays an important part in the socialising effect of songs-in-performance, the spatial determination of the performance is another factor which should not be neglected.

Zumthor insists on the potential influence of spatial modalities on the performance of oral poetry, arguing that a particular location can provoke a particular performance and that a performance planned outdoors, for example, if transferred indoors due to weather conditions, can create a tension between the place and the performance.⁵⁰ Traditionally, specific locations have been associated with specific types of performance, which means that the mere fact of being present in the same location creates a certain complicity between members of an audience. Zumthor mentions the social differences between the clienteles of *caveaux* and of *goguettes* in the early

⁴⁹ Frith, *Performing Rites*, p.273.

⁵⁰ Zumthor, p.153.

nineteenth century,⁵¹ while Calvet observes that a few decades later, ‘Montmartre [...] était un quartier mal famé, dangereux la nuit, où le beau monde ne se risquait guère, sauf justement pour aller écouter Aristide Bruant ou Jules Jouy: la chanson n’était pas émise d’un lieu culturel, mais plutôt d’un lieu maudit et la bourgeoisie allait, pour l’écouter, s’encanailler.’⁵²

This illustrates the fact that, until the 1940s, places in which artists performed were socially connoted. Although it is undeniable that the social connotations of the locations in which artists performed tended to fade away with the development of music-halls after the Second World War, in the 1950s a difference was still drawn between artists who had emerged from the cabaret scene and those who had not; and in Calvet’s words, ‘la “bonne” chanson française, celle qui a fleuri dans les années cinquante et qui a connu un grand succès à l’étranger, est avant tout une chanson qui vient du cabaret.’⁵³ The careers of Brel, Brassens and Ferré having developed in a transitional period of music performance, all the details which reminded the audience of the cabaret times appealed to the public’s nostalgia, thus adding to the singers’ authenticity, and creating a solidarity between members of an audience convinced of the legitimacy of their tastes. Sometimes, even mediocre performances were blamed on the difficulty of adapting to the new constraints of the music-hall, as the following article testifies: ‘[...] en dépit du succès qu’il obtint l’an dernier sur cette même scène de l’Olympia, Léo Ferré n’est pas encore adapté à cet immense cadre. Ses chansons portaient mieux, c’est incontestable, dans les brumes des caves d’où émergeaient son piano et sa longue figure inquiétante.’⁵⁴ In this example, Ferré’s poor performance at the

⁵¹ Zumthor, p.155.

⁵² Louis-Jean Calvet, *Chanson et société* (Paris: Payot, 1981), p.69.

⁵³ Calvet, *Chanson et société*, p.73.

⁵⁴ C. de Rivoyre, ‘Ferré’, *Le Monde*, 18 March 1955.

music-hall is interpreted as a sign of his total belonging to the cabaret tradition and is therefore almost positively connoted.

If most songs, by their nature and through performance, aim to gather an audience around a common sense of a shared cultural background and shared social values, it is important not to forget, however, that they can also divide. The following section will examine the fact that the resonance of a song, for the group that listens to it, can be more than purely cultural: it can also be social. In judging a song, as has just been observed, factors of 'recognition' have proven to be essential, for whether or not a song finds an echo with the listener's aesthetic and cultural dispositions will strongly influence its reception. Similarly essential is the meaning of these cultural/aesthetic dispositions within a given social group; and in the 1950s and 1960s, social boundaries were being challenged in many ways: the second part of this chapter will insist on the widening of the generation gap, while Chapter Four will discuss the (theoretical) levelling of social classes in the post-war period.

The following section, therefore, will argue that the social connotations of songs can really influence their popularity and their reception, particularly in the context of post-war France. Songs can be socially determining, and affirming one's like or dislike of a song can be more than a mere question of taste: it can be a question of social distinction. The next section, then, will examine the social connotations of song in relation to other forms of cultural capital as defined by Pierre Bourdieu in *La Distinction*, and analyse the potential impact of these connotations on the listener.

b – Song and social position

In *La Distinction*, Bourdieu analyses the issues at stake in the relationships between social groups, and more particularly between different groups within the same social class, since it is between ‘les groupes les plus proches dans l’espace social’ that ‘la concurrence est la plus directe et la plus immédiate.’⁵⁵ He argues that such an analysis requires giving up the traditional metaphor of the social ladder with which social hierarchy is usually associated, as it would be misleading to use the same criteria to measure the opposition between industrial managers and academics and the opposition between managers and workers (137). Indeed, he explains that there are several types of capital, and although the traditional conception of social hierarchy mainly focuses on the possession of *economic* capital, Bourdieu insists on the importance of *cultural* capital, arguing that the conversion of one type of capital into another is always a possibility: ‘Le taux de conversion des différentes espèces de capital est un des enjeux fondamentaux des luttes entre les différentes fractions de classe dont le pouvoir et les privilèges sont attachés à l’une ou l’autre de ces espèces’(137-138). This means that liking an artist *can* be a sign of one’s cultural capital and that asserting one’s taste for a singer can be synonymous with asserting one’s belonging to a specific social group. In other words, what Bourdieu’s theory suggests, is that the part played by ‘snobbery’ in people’s assertion of whether or not they like an artist should not be neglected. As has been observed above through the mention of the importance of performance locations, and as will be confirmed in Chapter Three, through the analysis of the singers’ audiences, the fact that Brel, Brassens, and Ferré were associated with specific ideologies and gradually acquired social and literary connotations had a significant

⁵⁵Pierre Bourdieu, *La Distinction: critique sociale du jugement* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1979), p.64.

impact on the composition of their audiences. In particular, such connotations and associations have arguably played an important part in Ferré's celebrity; indeed, many of Ferré's songs can legitimately be judged hermetic, and it is therefore likely that a significant part of his audience did not actually understand them. This would mean that Ferré might *partly* owe his success to what he meant as an artist rather than to the lyrical content of his work (emphasis is put on 'partly', since the high quality of his work is not being questioned here); and this might be because liking Ferré is a social statement: it means enjoying difficult work, and appreciating unconventional, non-conformist, slightly irritating figures, which, as Bourdieu's survey will testify, is characteristic of individuals with a higher cultural capital.

Bourdieu argues that access to cultural capital requires abilities and instruments that are not equally distributed. Although, as he also observes, compulsory schooling has had a levelling effect on scholarly capital among social classes, in order to convert cultural capital into social capital, one needs to show an 'aesthetic disposition' which can only be acquired through long-term inherited familiarity with culture and which consequently devalues culture solely acquired at school. Bourdieu then explains that one's degree of aesthetic disposition expresses itself through one's artistic tastes. Aesthetically 'disposed' individuals will be confident enough in their tastes to decide if a work has an aesthetic value or not, whether they are dealing with an established work of art, or with 'des oeuvres culturelles qui ne sont pas encore consacrées – comme, en un temps, les arts primitifs [...] – ou des objets naturels'.⁵⁶

What Bourdieu explains in *La Distinction* is that the more a work of art is concerned with *representation* (form and style) as opposed to the *represented object*, the more this art is autonomous: instead of referring to reality it refers to other instances

⁵⁶ Bourdieu, p.iii.

of the same art. Hence the fact that ‘la disposition esthétique qu’appellent les productions d’un champ de production parvenu à un haut degré d’autonomie est indissociable d’une compétence culturelle spécifique’(iv). This is why intellectuals, who have a higher cultural capital, will distinguish themselves by preferring art which focuses on representation whereas people with a lesser cultural capital will prefer art in which the representation is faithful to the represented objects (v). This results in an opposition between what Bourdieu called ‘esthétique savante’ and ‘esthétique populaire.’ The ‘esthétique savante’ ‘s’enracine dans une éthique [...] de la distance élective aux nécessités du monde naturel et social qui peut prendre la forme d’un agnosticisme moral’(vi) whereas ‘tout se passe comme si “l’esthétique populaire” était fondée sur l’affirmation de la continuité de l’art et de la vie, qui implique la subordination de la forme à la fonction, ou, si l’on veut, sur le refus du refus qui est au principe même de l’esthétique savante’(33). Popular song, however, is an art which, as Bourdieu observed, has an ambiguous place in the cultural sphere because it is a cultural property which is almost universally accessible. Whereas painting and classical music are forms of art which demand specific aptitudes and some intelligence of perception from their audience, song – along with photography according to Bourdieu – is more directly accessible (65). The ambiguity of the cultural position of song is therefore characterised by the fact that, on the one hand, access to song does not require specific abilities and is in this way indiscriminate, and on the other hand, it can draw on the aesthetic principles of both literature and music, with which it has affinities, thereby appealing to representatives of a more ‘savante’ aesthetic.

Instead of confronting the two aesthetics identified by Bourdieu, then, it could be argued that song actually combines them. As the following chapters will discuss in further detail, part of the three singers’ popularity rests on the fact that their songs

radiate a sentiment of familiarity: they tell familiar stories and use recognisable instruments. They are, in this respect, an illustration of Bourdieu's definition of the 'esthétique populaire': they are a straightforward and unchallenging representation of reality. However, in many other respects, the singers' work does require specific aptitudes and a certain knowledge in order to be fully understood: the rhythm of Brassens' songs, for example, will be better appreciated by someone familiar with jazz and blues music; similarly, Ferré's lyrics will make more sense to someone who has read the Romantic poets and who is aware of the different conflicts between the members of the Surrealist group.

The specific position of song in the cultural sphere can partly be explained by the dual legacy of its origins. Although, as the first part of this chapter has demonstrated, there is no clear distinction between song and poetry, it is undeniable that modern song has taken from two parallel genres: one which is the ancestor of traditional popular song, the other one the ancestor of a more literary, oral and then written, poetry. Dietmar Rieger reminds his reader that 'quiconque s'occupe de la chanson littéraire en France et de son histoire doit toujours se rendre compte du fait qu'elle tire son origine du lyrisme médiéval';⁵⁷ but one should not forget either that the genre was perpetuated in the streets and was therefore also influenced by centuries of songs from popular and illiterate backgrounds.

By the very nature of its origins, modern song therefore has incorporated the influences of both popular and literary traditions. But although literary poetry and popular song could be expected to have mutually influenced each other, the modern era seems to have seen literary poetry settle in the written form, thereby becoming less

⁵⁷ Dietmar Rieger, ed., *La Chanson française et son histoire* (Tübingen: GNV Gunter Narr Verlag, 1988), p.1.

susceptible to external influences. Song on the contrary, because of its oral and therefore immediate dimension, is more flexible and feeds on the moment. In his study, Zumthor explains that

un instinct vital pousse la poésie orale à explorer, à exploiter au maximum les ressources de la communication vocale [...]. Cette tendance, sujette à toute espèce de distorsion, apparaît à qui bon la considère d'assez haut qualitativement indifférente: tout est bon qui semble viser le but. Nul doute que ce ne soit cette faiblesse de la poésie orale qui la rende tellement sensible aux influences littéraires.⁵⁸

Similarly, Jean-Claude Klein observes about traditional songs – but this can similarly apply to modern song in general – that although folklorists are often preoccupied with knowing whether the nature of a corpus of songs is ‘savante ou populaire’, in actual fact, ‘la chanson traditionnelle est une matière plastique, adaptable, qui est susceptible de migrer d’un milieu vers un autre.’⁵⁹

The relationship between popular song and literary poetry, was, until a certain point, mainly unidirectional: although a song could always be noble or popular, written poetry was only reluctantly associated with ‘the popular.’ Heinz Thoma observes that when, in 1841, a collection of poems written by workers was published, newspapers condemned it as outrageous; and as he points out, ‘on peut supposer que ce qui inquiète *La revue des deux mondes* n’est pas le contenu de ces poèmes, mais le fait que des ouvriers osent écrire des poèmes.’⁶⁰ However, the aspirations to popularisation of the twentieth century seem to have mutualised the process of influences; as Chapter One has demonstrated, song established its pedigree in the 1950s, which is the period when literature and poetry were opening to oral and more popular genres in their concern to democratise. Moreover, by setting poets to music and by developing the poetic

⁵⁸ Zumthor, p.130.

⁵⁹ Jean-Claude Klein, *Florilège de la chanson française* (Paris: Bordas ‘Les Compacts’ series No. 17, 1990) p.14.

⁶⁰ Heinz Thoma ‘La chanson et le problème des deux cultures (1815-1851) in Dietmar Rieger, ed., *La Chanson française et son histoire* (Tübingen: GNV Gunter Narr Verlag, 1988) p. 91.

dimension of their own songs, singers contributed to blurring even further the frontier between the intellectual and the popular.

Modern song is therefore a cultural and social hybrid; besides, within the genre itself, some works can be considered as more or less popular or intellectual. In *La Distinction*, Bourdieu analyses the tastes as regards songs of a cross section of the population in the 1960s. In the analysis of his survey (which will be examined in more detail in Chapter Three, in relation to the composition of the singers' audience) he underlines a difference between what he called 'intellectual' song, which include notably Ferré, Ferrat, and to a certain extent Brassens and Brel, and a more 'popular' type of songs represented by Adamo, Mireille Mathieu or Sheila.⁶¹ In fact, it seems that the songs which he refers to as more 'intellectual' belong to the *chanson* genre; that is to say the genre which critics have called 'chanson littéraire', 'chanson poétique' or 'bonne chanson', and which the first part of this chapter has defined, following Zumthor's theories, as songs with a limited 'investissement du langage poétique par la musicalité'.⁶² Bourdieu, however, also acknowledges the difficulty of defining precisely the notions of intellectual and of popular, since the assignment of the qualifiers 'intellectual' or 'popular' to a work also depends on the range of the work's diffusion. For example, as he explains with regard to music, 'le goût populaire est représenté par le choix d'œuvres de musique dite "légère" ou de musique savante dévalorisée par la divulgation comme le Beau Danube bleu, la Traviata, l'Arlésienne.'⁶³

However, Bourdieu's opposition between 'esthétique populaire' and 'esthétique savante' has to be used with care, since with the hindsight of several decades, his hierarchical classification of the arts can seem dated. This is partly because Bourdieu's

⁶¹ Bourdieu, p.65.

⁶² Zumthor, p.182.

⁶³ Bourdieu, p.16.

definition of the ‘esthétique populaire’ suggests a certain passivity on the part of the consumer of so-called ‘popular’ art; and years of studies of popular culture have demonstrated that the part played by the consumer of popular art is far from being a passive one. Nevertheless, his insistence on the ‘ambiguous’ position of song in the cultural sphere remains useful in the context of this study, since it can be paralleled with an ambiguity mentioned in the first part of this chapter, which is the influence of the criteria of the written on the appreciation of an oral genre such as *chanson*. Instead of describing the work of Brel, Brassens, and Ferré as combining an ‘esthétique populaire’ with an ‘esthétique savante’, a more accurate and updated definition would therefore be to say that they combine an aesthetic of the oral with one of the written.⁶⁴ Among the many different types of songs, *chanson* is the one in which the lyrics are of most importance. Because of that, it is also the type of song that bears most similarities with the written genres; and given that, as has been mentioned earlier in this chapter, the more a song complies with the aesthetic criteria of the written, the more it is judged to be of high quality, it is understandable that *chanson* – and more specifically, in the context of this study, the work of Brel, Brassens, and Ferré – should be perceived as an intermediary between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture.

It is not surprising therefore that when it comes to culture as a step towards social distinction, song is described by Bourdieu as a site of contact between social classes. *La Distinction* warns that people’s aesthetic choices partly being motivated by a will – often pretentious – to distinguish themselves from inferior social groups, tastes in popular songs must be treated carefully: ‘les intellectuels, les artistes et les professeurs d’enseignement supérieur semblent balancer entre le refus en bloc de ce qui ne peut être,

⁶⁴ The opposition here made between oral and written aesthetic is only valid within the limits of the present study of *chanson*, and by no means pretends to supplant Bourdieu’s original opposition between ‘esthétique populaire’ and ‘esthétique savante’.

au mieux, qu'un "art moyen", et une adhésion sélective, propre à manifester l'universalité de leur culture et de leur disposition esthétique.⁶⁵ So it is interesting to notice that singers like Brassens, Ferré, Ferrat or even Brel are listened to by a wide range of society, since on the one hand, academics are willing to emphasise the scope of their culture by showing that they listen to songs (but not just *any* songs), and on the other hand, the middle-classes listen to the same singers as academics to distinguish themselves from the popular classes who listen to lighter songs – once again, a more detailed analysis of this survey appears in Chapter Three. As Bourdieu observed, 'ce sont les classes moyennes qui trouvent dans la chanson (comme dans la photographie) une occasion de manifester leur prétention artistique en refusant les chanteurs favoris des classes populaires [...] et en affirmant leur préférence pour les chanteurs qui essaient d'ennoblir ce genre "mineur"' (65). Once again, it might not be valid, today, to discuss class distinction in such rigid terms; but if the emphasis is placed on the inequality of the social esteem given to oral and written aesthetics rather than on a strict class distinction, Bourdieu's theory represents a useful insight into the ways in which *chanson* can bring together a very heterogeneous audience.

This chapter has so far examined the specific position of song in the cultural and social sphere; it has analysed how elements which are an integral part of the nature of song, such as its orality and its cultural resonance and social connotations, are essential to understanding what is at stake in the public phenomenon surrounding the trio Brel-Brassens-Ferré. The second part of this chapter will focus on the role played by external factors in the creation of the phenomenon. The 1950s and 1960s indeed saw the rise of several concepts and ideals, such as counterculture, commodification and celebrity,

⁶⁵ Bourdieu, p.65.

which greatly influenced the public reception of song and singers, and which therefore also contributed to the creation of the trio.

B – The reception of songs in the 1950s and 1960s

1) A cultural crisis: young people and music

During the 1950s and 1960s, France – and the western world in general – was the scene of a major sociological revolution characterised by the significant increase in the numbers of young people on the cultural market. Although youth movements had been numerous and dynamic before the war, it was only during the second half of the twentieth century that cultural practices specific to young people started to become influential in society, transcending class and gender divisions.⁶⁶ For these youths who tended to define their values negatively against those of their parents and grandparents, music represented one of the few ‘positive’ manifestations of their social identity.

a – Social context: youth and counterculture

The end of the Second World War started what later became known as the ‘Trente Glorieuses’: thirty years of economic prosperity. As Roger Price explains, after the Liberation, ‘a massive stimulus [was] afforded by reconstruction and then by the liberalisation of international trade and increased domestic prosperity.’⁶⁷ This prosperity expressed itself through the emergence of new technologies which improved work conditions, modernised urban and rural France, and which more generally contributed to

⁶⁶ André Burguière, ed., *Histoire de la France, Les formes de la culture* (Paris: Seuil, 1993), p.446.

⁶⁷ Roger Price, *A Concise History of France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Second Edition 2005, First Edition 1993), p.315.

increase the comfort of everyday-life. One of the consequences of this economic prosperity and of the parallel move towards a capitalist society, was a change in the attitude towards consumption: in the 1950s and 1960s, consuming was no longer a privilege, it had become a widespread societal phenomenon.

As the prosperity of the Trente Glorieuses was accompanied by important changes in living standards, it also transformed social interactions, particularly between generations. As Price observes,

Of the three generations alive in the 1960s, the oldest had been formed by the experience of the First World War. Most had direct links with the rural world. Their children, born in the 1920s and 1930s [...] had been marked by the experience of the second war and post-war austerity. Nevertheless, this was the generation which broke with tradition, with the 'eternal France'. Their children, [...] were the first children of the consumer society, their values profoundly different from those of their parents or grandparents.⁶⁸

Price's description of the three generations of the 1960s emphasises the profound gulf which the rapid evolution of society created between adults and teenagers. The increasing use of the term 'teenager', by the media and sociologists, to define a social category of individuals, further illustrates the estrangement of generations in the early 1960s.

The reasons for the deepening of the generation gap are numerous and difficult to define precisely. Bourdieu partly ascribes teenagers' rebellion to the disillusion which they experienced as a result of the discrepancy between the social identity which the school system seemed to promise and the social identity which it actually delivered once they had left school.⁶⁹ According to Looseley's definition, the later 1950s teenager was the product of a conjunction of circumstances which included 'the post-war baby-boom, the raising of the French school-leaving age from fourteen to sixteen in 1959 and the expansion of higher education, industrial recovery and the transformation of the

⁶⁸ Price, p.326.

⁶⁹ Bourdieu, p.161.

economy into one dependent on consumer goods'.⁷⁰ Studying for longer, young people stayed longer at home, thereby making more obvious and less bearable the conflicts with their parents. Despite the imprecision of any attempt to identify the causes, the fact was that this generation of teenagers at odds with their elders' values was rapidly associated with rebellion, protest and violence. Being the first generation brought up in a society in which consumption and leisure time were becoming a way of life, teenagers of the 1960s were indeed a cause for concern for the older generations. As Frith observes: 'One fear was that teenagers consumed without any values at all [...]. "Teenager" was a commercial creation and the result of that creation was a nihilistic culture, a generation without any values save those of flashy, instant pleasures. [...] What the notion of the teenager did was to blur the distinction between the ordinary and the violent kids.'⁷¹

However, what teenagers protested against was not obvious to begin with, and if Burguière rightly observed that their protest was 'un symptôme significatif, et représentatif', he also wondered:

De quoi? Non pas de la misère. Les Trente Glorieuses ont commencé, Gavroche est loin et, tout autant, les jeunes prolétaires intellectuels, plus ou moins crève-la-faim, des années 1880-1890. Ni même la rébellion globale: le temps est passé des "apaches" du début du siècle, en rupture complète avec leur famille, rejetant tout travail. [...] Ces adolescents vont à l'usine, au bureau, à l'école: pas plus de 13% d'oisifs.⁷²

The revolt which animated the 1960s youth seems to have been undefined and unfocused; it was simultaneously nurtured by the resentment of the society in which they lived, and by a desire – or need – to be part of this society by developing and imposing their own identity. Politically, this unfocused and rebellious passion was epitomised in the worldwide protests of May 1968; culturally, it was reflected in the

⁷⁰ Looseley, *Popular Music in Contemporary France*, p.23.

⁷¹ Simon Frith, *The Sociology of Rock* (London: Constable, 1978), p.20-21.

⁷² Burguière, p.471.

unbridled enthusiasm of the younger generation for a new type of music: rock, or rock 'n' roll, or 'yéyé' music.

While one cannot strictly say that the revolts of May 1968 and the success of rock are two representations of a common phenomenon, they both express rebellion against older values. As Michael Seidman wrote, during the May 1968 events in France, Pompidou and Malraux both asserted that what was being attacked was not the government but civilisation itself.⁷³ The main claim of protesting students was the right to be happy and love freely, which entailed a rejection of social conventions inherited from the nineteenth century;⁷⁴ behind their refusal of any form of authority, whether it came from the family, the State or the Church, lay a demand for a new, modern way of life to be legitimised.

The same rebellious motivations were associated with the emergence of rock 'n' roll: Mark Mattern described it as a 'countercultural and political movement associated with drug experimentation, generational rebellion, and opposition to the Vietnam war'.⁷⁵ Rock, in other words, was seen as a sub-culture which represented the cultural expression of anti-authoritarian values. However, rock was not merely a cultural movement, it was a phenomenon which teenagers took very seriously and which they made an integral part of their everyday and private lives. Zumthor, although he does not discuss the specific case of rock, suggests the possibility that the vital importance of songs for post-war youth could be ascribed to the 'misery' which they had inherited from their elders. Studying the importance of orality in different cultures,

⁷³ Michael Seidman, *The Imaginary Revolution – Parisian Students and Workers in 1968* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2004, reprinted in 2006), p.2.

⁷⁴ Serge Berstein, *La France de l'expansion 1. La République gaullienne 1958-1969* (Paris: Seuil, collection Points Histoire, 1989), p.303.

⁷⁵ Mark Mattern, *Acting in Concert: Music, Community, and Political Action* (New Jersey and London: Rutgers University Press, 1998), p.16.

he notices that the more a civilisation lives in a poor and austere environment, the more it privileges any forms of oral poetry, ‘comme si la misère écologique, étouffant les autres activités artistiques, concentrait sur l’œuvre de la voix l’énergie d’une civilisation.’ He then draws a parallel with western post-war society: ‘D’où, peut-être, la fonction vitale qu’assume la chanson pour nos jeunes depuis vingt ou trente ans, dans l’indigence intellectuelle, esthétique et morale du monde que nous leur avons fait.’⁷⁶

Although Zumthor’s parallel is only an assumption, it suggests that the social values associated with rock music potentially contain the social values in which an unstable post-war teenage generation had taken refuge. This is precisely what Edgar Morin understood and analysed in his famous articles ‘Salut les Copains’ published in the newspaper *Le Monde* in July 1963.⁷⁷

b – Music and Salut les Copains.

Morin’s articles represent a seminal analysis of the rock phenomenon in France in the early 1960s. They were written following a major concert which had taken place on 22 June 1963 at the Place de la Nation. The concert had been organised by the radio station Europe n°1 to celebrate the first anniversary of the then highly popular magazine *Salut les copains*. The magazine discussed rock ‘n’ roll related issues, particularly rock idols of the moment, among whom Johnny Hallyday and Sylvie Vartan were the magazine’s favourites. Following the success of the magazine, a radio programme, also called ‘Salut les Copains’, had been launched with similar success; and the success was confirmed by the surprisingly large turnout at the anniversary concert. The concert has now become a landmark symbolising the irreversibility of rock culture in France, and

⁷⁶ Zumthor, p.163.

⁷⁷ Edgar Morin, ‘Salut les copains’, *Le Monde*, 6 July 1963 and 7 July 1963.

Morin's articles are noteworthy for having anticipated so accurately the social significance of the phenomenon.

Morin's central argument is that whereas music producers and the media had identified the 'idol' as the key figure of rock culture in France, the Europe n°1 concert made it clear that it was actually the 'copain' which teenagers valued above everything. This interestingly put the emphasis once more on the notion of youth, although, as Morin observes, one does not need to be a teenager to be a 'copain': 'on peut être copain même jusqu'à trente ans à condition d'avoir le je ne sais quoi copain'. The articles explain that the 'copain' culture, born under the influence of entertainment capitalism, implied a promotion of youthfulness. A 'copain' was someone who empathised with the younger generation, who connected with it and shared its values, regardless of image or social status: in Morin's words, the 'copain' image ranged 'depuis le blouson noir avec chaîne de vélo [...] jusqu'au beatnik, l'intellectuel barbu et rebelle, héritier de ce que les journaux appelaient il y a dix ans les existentialistes'.

Rock culture, therefore, was a lot more than a cultural phenomenon: it embodied the identity of a generation. Further illustrating this idea, Morin defines the main characteristics of the 'copain' culture, explaining that it crystallised around cultural habits as varied as clothing, female make-up, the purchase of typically teenage goods such as radios, guitars and records, a common language punctuated by words like 'terrible', 'copain' or 'sensass', ceremonies like 'surprises-parties' and music-hall concerts, and heroes like Johnny Hallyday or Sylvie Vartan. Morin's article thus demonstrates that teenagers in the 1960s organised their lives in a playful and nihilistic fashion; however, as he also points out, the main focus of this structure being personal enjoyment, teenagers' new way of life paradoxically remains an integral part of the capitalist society that they reject. Morin goes as far as saying that the 1960s 'copains'

are actually a microcosm of the present society, and foreshadow a future society driven by the vain and desperate belief that being young is an excuse to disregard the real tragedies of society. As David Looseley observes ‘Five years later, the similarly ambivalent meanings of the May events were to reveal Morin to have been remarkably prescient.’⁷⁸

Such a cultural context can only have had a strong impact on the reception of traditional *chanson*. As Chapter One has demonstrated, the *chanson* of which Brel, Brassens and Ferré are emblematic fitted in with the intellectual movements of the time, and was marked by the legacy of traditional songs. In other terms, it was not at all part of the rebellious and playful structure of life which Morin identified to be the way of life of the younger generation of the time; and even if Ferré did collaborate with a rock band in the early 1970s, in the 1950s and 1960s, his work was as unrepresentative of rock culture as that of Brassens or Brel. The popularity of the three singers, however, was not an exception, and although the emergence of rock confronted the *chanson* genre with challenges, it did not altogether obstruct its development.

The main challenge that *chanson* faced was to ensure financial return. Christian Hermelin observes that, following the explosion of the music industry and the rise of rock idols, ‘les portes se ferment non seulement devant les auteurs-interprètes accomplis (à quelques exceptions près), mais encore devant les jeunes qui ne sont pas tentés par la carrière d’idoles’;⁷⁹ record companies followed the market fluctuations and with rock fans buying many more records than followers of *chanson*, producers became more selective with *chansons* and only invested in authors of proven market value. However,

⁷⁸ David Looseley, ‘In from the margins: *chanson*, pop and cultural legitimacy’ in Hugh Dauncey and Steve Cannon, eds. *Popular Music in France from Chanson to Techno* (London and New York: Ashgate, 2003), p.34.

⁷⁹ Hermelin, p.23.

Hermelin also points out that despite the lower profitability of *chanson* in comparison with rock, there was still a place for the two types of songs on the market:

si l'on regarde l'évolution comparée des classements en 45 tours et en 33 tours sur une année, on constate encore une différence assez nette. Durant la saison 69, le mouvement général en 45 tours français était favorable à Johnny Hallyday, Sylvie Vartan, Joe Dassin, Dalida, Claude François, Richard Anthony alors qu'en grand format, il l'était pour Serge Reggiani, Jacques Brel, Jean Ferrat, Léo Ferré.⁸⁰

It cannot be said, therefore, that rock music supplanted *chanson*, since the two types of music coexisted for many years without qualitatively undermining each other; and if they were not equally lucrative, they did nonetheless possess the same capacity to arouse their audience's enthusiasm. Journalist Marc Robine's recollection of Brel's first triumph at the Olympia music-hall in October 1961, clearly illustrates this idea: 'lorsqu'il s'agit de succéder à Johnny Hallyday à l'Olympia, les volontaires ne se bousculent pas. [...] Mettant constamment le public au bord de la transe, Hallyday a fait "un malheur". [...] Seul Brel accepte de relever le défi. [...] L'ampleur du triomphe qu'il obtient ce soir-là se mesure à la lecture des journaux du lendemain.'⁸¹ Brel's success just after Hallyday's demonstrates that rock and *chanson* could be successful at the same time, in the same music-halls, possibly with similar audiences. Although the composition of their audiences is difficult to know precisely, the fact that Hallyday, Brassens, Brel, Ferré, Vartan and many others were regularly on the same variety radio programmes suggests that their audiences cannot have been drastically different.⁸² More importantly, *chanson* and rock singers showed mutual respect for each other's work, which further illustrates that any conflict between them related more to the market situation than to the quality of their music. During the famous 1969 interview, Cristiani

⁸⁰ Hermelin, pp.3-4.

⁸¹ *Chorus: les cahiers de la chanson n°25: Spécial Jacques Brel* (Brézolles: Les Éditions du Verbe, Automne 1998), pp.82-83.

⁸² The analysis of the database of the Institut National de l'Audiovisuel shows, for example, that between 1968 and 1969, Brassens shared the spotlight with Hallyday, Mariano and Mathieu on the radio programme *On connaît la chanson* on the channel *Inter-Variétés*. The audience of Brel, Brassens and Ferré will be analysed in more detail in the next chapter.

asked Brel, Brassens and Ferré what they thought of the beatnik and hippy culture associated with rock music: '*Brel*: c'est l'anarchie moderne, une forme de refus. C'est quelque chose de nouveau et qui, en tout cas, n'a rien de guerrier, ça c'est déjà sympathique. *Ferré*: Vous avez la réponse, on aime beaucoup.'

⁸³

Although it can therefore be argued that rock and *chanson* successfully coexisted, the question which remains unanswered is how *chanson* fits in with the cultural standards introduced by rock culture. *Chanson* authors in the 1950s and 1960s did not have much in common with rock idols: they dressed differently, made different music, and behaved differently. Brel Brassens and Ferré, for example, always dressed quite traditionally; contrary to rock idols, they were not provocative in a sexual way and were more famous for their unattractiveness than for their sex-appeal. Their songs, as opposed to rock songs, could not be danced to and did nothing to satisfy the *yéyé* enthusiasm for rhythm. Finally, they had no Anglo-American influence and only reluctantly coped with their own celebrity at a time when rock idols courted the media. However, the fact was that *chanson* as exemplified by Brel, Brassens and Ferré could be popular with a rock audience whose expectations of music seem to have been incompatible with the three singers' work; this suggests that behind this apparent incompatibility lay some common aspirations.

Although Brel, Brassens and Ferré were completely out of the system of the 'copain' generation, they might have been accurate commentators on the despair and the individualism which animated it. In his study of French song in the late 1960s, Hermelin identifies two types of songs and thus describes their characteristics:

- l'une est plus attachée aux modes collectives, l'autre se développe en marge;

⁸³ *Chorus: les cahiers de la chanson n°25*, p.155.

- l'une est plus attachée aux rythmes, à des recherches mélodiques simples, à la danse; l'autre donne une plus grande place au texte;
- l'une est plus internationale; l'autre garde des caractères nationaux;
- l'une est principalement faite pour la communication immédiate; l'autre naissant des besoins d'expression de l'auteur.⁸⁴

There is no doubt that rock would belong to the first type of song while *chanson* would belong to the second. The criteria listed by Hermelin establish an interesting comparison between the two types of song: they suggest that the first category integrates itself in a system, in a social reality, and therefore only makes sense as part of this system; on the contrary, the second category focuses on the perspective of the individual. When applied to rock and *chanson*, these criteria could justify the fact that Johnny Hallyday, Sylvie Vartan and the other idols belonged to the 'copain' culture and contributed to its external dynamism, while *chanson* authors, solitary and desperately optimistic, embodied their deepest ideals. Morin mentions the paradoxical mixture of revolt and conservatism of the younger generation; the same paradoxes can be found in Brel, Brassens and Ferré's works and lives, and will be further analysed in Chapter Four. Besides, the exaltation of youthfulness which characterised the 'copain' culture, with its desperate faith in youth, perfectly echoes the fascination of the three singers with childhood and their belief that the key to freedom and happiness is to become '*vieux sans être adultes*' (*La chanson des vieux amants*, Brel).

The work of Brel, Brassens and Ferré, and *chanson* in general, therefore, far from being against the music trends of the 1950s and 1960s, shared, if not the practices, at least some of the preoccupations at the heart of the 'social revolution' of the 1960s. This proves that despite its unfashionable form, *chanson* was not a redundant genre but one that had the means to adapt and to make itself heard.

⁸⁴ Hermelin, p.4.

2) Music industry and celebrity

The emergence of rock music and the explosion of the music industry being contemporaneous, rock immediately adapted to the economic and technical demands of the music industry: from the beginning, rock was adapted to big audience performances, and rock singers readily understood the importance of selling records and being present in the media. On the contrary, *chanson* had inherited from the cabaret tradition in which singers had to be able to perform with a minimum of technical devices and which only rarely led them to celebrity. The 1950s and 1960s thus presented the *chanson* genre with a tripartite challenge: to comply simultaneously with the technical, financial and media requirements of the newly emerged music industry.

a – Mass production and its practical implications

The explosion of the music industry was characterised by the development of new techniques (like the microphone, the production of records, the invention of television, and the increasing use of the radio for entertainment purposes) which revolutionised the production, performance and diffusion of songs. These inventions were in keeping with the move towards an ever more capitalist society since each in its own way emphasised the demarcation between audience and singer, thereby contributing to the individualisation of the listening experience.

Microphones and the progress of sound technology made it possible for concert halls to become dramatically bigger, and the 1950s and 1960s symbolise a transition in song performance, from the cabaret to the music-hall. With a much bigger audience, the space had to be organised differently, and instead of merging performance and audience

spaces in the way the *café-concerts* did, music-halls separated more neatly the singer and the public whose role became limited to that of spectators. Looseley, developing Serge Dillaz's argument, explains that with the decline of *café-concerts*, 'singing along to songs whose lyrics were of some organic, collective significance died out and songs became more facile. The public, now listening and watching rather than singing along, became more apathetic.'⁸⁵

With the music-hall, the performer became the sole focus of attention of an audience whose power and expectations increased in parallel with its passivity – the term 'passivity' is here understood as a lack of direct participation in the performance, since as Looseley rightly reminds his readers, it is possible to consider 'the consumption of mass-cultural forms [like a concert] to be creative in its own right, to be active and even subversive.'⁸⁶ Television, radio, and records, by making the work of singers widely accessible at any time, also contributed to this phenomenon. These new technologies mean that listeners have control over the performance of music which in its turn penetrates their everyday and private lives. One of the consequences of this was that public and private spaces started merging: the performer was more formally identified as a public figure whose audience could at its pleasure integrate him or her into their private lives.

The same confrontation of public and private spaces occurred during public performances, since as Frith points out, the 'microphone made it possible for singers to make musical sounds – soft sounds, close sounds – that had not really been heard before in terms of public performance [...]. The microphone allowed us to hear people in ways that normally implied intimacy – the whisper, the caress, the murmur.'⁸⁷ Despite the larger sizes of concert halls and audiences, then, the expansion of the music industry

⁸⁵ Looseley, *Popular Music in Contemporary France*, p.76.

⁸⁶ Looseley, *Popular Music in Contemporary France*, p.81.

⁸⁷ Frith, *Performing Rites*, p.187.

strengthened further the links between performers and their public. For rock singers, like Johnny Hallyday for example, whose performances had been shaped by the requirements of the music industry, this artificial intimacy established between artist and audience was controllable and artistically exploitable. For *chanson* artists like Brel, Brassens and Ferré, who had been trained in cabarets and *café-concerts* where the artist was alone on stage and had to make himself heard through the café hubbub, the music-hall experience emphasised the self-revelatory dimension of the artist's act. This made *chanson* singers like Brel, Brassens and Ferré appeal to a modern audience eager to penetrate artists' inner selves, but by transposing cabaret techniques onto the music-hall stage they also appealed to a public nostalgic for a pre music-industry age.

b – The commodification of song

Another aspect of the music industry to which *chanson* singers had to adapt was the marketing requirements to which their profession rapidly became subjected. Here again, rock idols were guided through the music market by their producers and therefore more easily coped with its economic demands. On the contrary, *chanson* singers were used to working alone and to writing and singing whatever they liked; if there were no financial returns, fewer people were affected. For *chanson* authors then, the music industry and the pressure it placed on them to produce songs that would sell, quickly came to symbolise capitalist authoritarianism; and when thrown onto the music market, artists like Brel, Brassens and Ferré were consequently animated by the antagonistic desires to be liked by the public and to resist the capitalist rules of the music industry.

For Brel, Brassens and Ferré, success was therefore more difficult to deal with than for rock singers, since they associated it with the corruption of their profession.

This of course had an important influence on their careers, as not only did they resent the implications of success, but they also knew that their public considered success as a potential threat to their authenticity and to the values it expected them to stand for. As Looseley explains, the notion of authenticity has always been important in French music, since France has had difficulty in accepting the commodification of art, which is perceived as a foreign corruption of a French exception.⁸⁸ According to the criteria identified by Hermelin to characterise ‘poet-singers’, *chanson* as exemplified by Brel, Brassens and Ferré was supposed to testify to national characteristics and to be independent of fashion trends;⁸⁹ this was precisely what the explosion of the music industry, through the commodification of song, undermined.

Chanson in the 1950s and 1960s was therefore trapped between its attachment to French artistic ‘authenticity’ – this notion will be explored in detail in Chapter Four – and the implications of commercial success. However, Frith, contesting the traditional categorisation of songs, argues that it might be misleading systematically to establish a link between the success of a performer and the ideology behind the performance. Indeed, he explains that whatever types of songs one might be dealing with, they all had to handle

the issues thrown up by their commodification. [...] The issues concerned – the position of the artist in the marketplace, the relations of class and community, the tensions between technology and tradition, the shaping of race and nation, the distinction of the public and the private – are not confined to any one social group, to any one musical practice. Whether they become pressing or not depends on circumstances, not ideology.⁹⁰

Frith’s insistence on the predominance of circumstances over ideology in determining the effects of the commodification of song, is precisely what the public struggles to accept. In the cases of Brel, Brassens and Ferré, this led to the singers’ income being the

⁸⁸ Looseley, *Popular Music in Contemporary France*, pp.9-10.

⁸⁹ Hermelin, p.4.

⁹⁰ Frith, *Performing Rites*, pp.45-46.

subject of many interviewers' questions, and indeed of many of their songs; as if their wealth, being incompatible with the values they stood for, had to be justified. The money issue was likewise raised by Cristiani during the 1969 interview; Ferré admitted that money was important as it provided independence, but was quick to add that 'le trop d'argent, je crois que, tous les trois, on s'en fout'; to which Brassens added: 'Nous on était très contents de gagner notre vie avec nos petites chansonnettes, c'est une affaire entendue. Mais on n'a pas fait ça dans cette intention, on a fait ça parce que ça nous plaisait. Ca nous rapporterait rien qu'on le ferait quand même!'; and Brel confirmed: 'Ah oui, moi ça ne me gênerait pas du tout.'⁹¹ The singers' main argument was that although they made money, they did not exploit anybody. Ferré, harassed by journalists and the public for driving expensive cars, later claimed his right to make money in his song *Et...Basta!* (1973):

Dis-donc Léo, ça ne te gêne pas de gagner de l'argent avec tes idées, non? Non, et ça ne me gênait pas non plus de n'en pas gagner avec mes idées, toujours les mêmes, il y a quelques années. Vois-tu, la différence qu'il y a entre moi et Monsieur Ford ou Monsieur Fiat, c'est que Ford ou Fiat envoient des ouvriers dans des usines et font de l'argent avec eux; moi, j'envoie mes idées dans la rue et je fais de l'argent avec elles, ça vous gêne? moi non!

As the following chapter will demonstrate, the financial issue, however trivial it might seem, did have an important effect on the singers' public images. Each act of generosity from Brel, Brassens and Ferré was more than a proof of their personal qualities: it was also a proof of their authenticity as *chanson* singers.

c – The artist and celebrity

The emergence of the star system and of the cult of celebrity in the 1950s and 1960s is another phenomenon whose impact on the careers of Brel, Brassens and Ferré should

⁹¹ Cristiani and Leloir, p.34.

not be neglected, since part of the popularity of the trio was paradoxically a result of their non-adaptation to the celebrity system. The social significance of the concept of 'celebrity' emerged in the post-war period under the influence of a media revolution characterised by the widespread use of the radio, television and the press – particularly magazines – to promote cinema and music artists. The emergence of the cult of celebrity is not, therefore, dissociable from the capitalist development of the marketing of popular culture such as music or cinema. David Marshall, in his study of celebrity and power, explains that the notion of celebrity 'resonates with conceptions of individuality that are the ideological ground of Western culture';⁹² individualism being at the core of capitalist values, Marshall's observation further illustrates the parallel existing between the rise of capitalism in the western world and the emergence of the cult of celebrity.

A celebrity contributes to individualistic values in that it can be perceived as a public and magnified representation of the self. In Marshall's words, 'the expansion of celebrity status in contemporary culture is dependent on its association with both capitalism, where the celebrity is an effective means for the commodification of the self, and democratic sentiments, where the celebrity is the embodiment of the potential of an accessible culture.'⁹³ This can also explain why the public is usually interested not only in the celebrity's artistic life, but also in his or her private, everyday life: the celebrity has to embody simultaneously the common individual and his or her potential ideal.

According to Marshall's arguments, then, the celebrity is the capitalist production of an exemplary individual; this suggests that there are consequently many possible points of identification between the celebrity and the common people, and that

⁹² P. David Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p.x.

⁹³ Marshall, pp.25-26.

the interest people take in the lives of celebrities often has a self-interested dimension.

Marshall, analysing different theories on the subject, explains that

Alberoni tentatively concludes that stars are, in part, a transitional phenomenon that identifies the need of the general community for an avenue through which to discuss issues of morality – ‘family, neighborhood, of production and consumption etc.’ – that are insufficiently or ineffectively handled in the rational sphere of evaluating political power elites.⁹⁴

Celebrities therefore serve capitalist values in several ways: firstly, they exalt individualism by being, willingly or not, a focus of attention not only as artists but also as individuals; secondly, as exemplary individuals, they represent an outlet for the passions and problems raised by capitalist society: talking about a celebrity is another way of talking about the place of individuals in society.

The relation between celebrities and the public is therefore simultaneously very impersonal, since it is a media construction, and very personal, since it involves feelings which have a resonance in everybody’s private lives. This meant that celebrities as created by the developing capitalist society of the 1950s and 1960s needed to be willing to accept that being artistically successful would generate public interest in their private lives. However, this is precisely what singers like Brel, Brassens and Ferré, whose art was originally more the product of the old school than of the music industry, struggled to accept. Whereas singers like Hallyday or Vartan went along with the requirements of fame by recurrently having their love lives exposed on the front page of *Salut les copains*, Brel, Brassens and Ferré were among singers who ostentatiously resented the intrusion of the media in their private lives. In their interviews as well as in their songs, they insisted that they lived just as everybody else and that there was consequently no point talking about it. The following chapter will examine in further details the relation of the singers with celebrity, but it is obvious that their reluctance to play the game of

⁹⁴ Marshall, p.16.

celebrity, instead of having a negative effect on their careers, was seen by the public as further evidence of their authenticity and actually contributed to their fame. So whether they were ‘stars’ or ‘anti-stars’, Brel, Brassens and Ferré were celebrities, and studying their (mal)functioning in the celebrity system will actually help understand their place and their significance, as public figures, in society. According to Marshall,

Although a celebrity may be positioned predominantly in one mediated form, that image is informed by the circulation of significant information about the celebrity in newspapers, magazines, interview programs, fanzines, rumors, and so on. The celebrity, in fact, is by definition a fundamentally intertextual sign.⁹⁵

Since the 1950s, the development of the star-system and of the music industry has made it increasingly important to take into account the social dimension of song, mainly, as the first part of this chapter has argued, by not disregarding its orality, its cultural resonance, and its social connotations. In the context of this study, the ‘orality’ of song is a fundamental consideration, since it contains the key to the way in which the public can appropriate an artist and his/her work. The second part of this chapter has also stressed the influence of economic and technological evolution on the lives and works of artists. The introduction to this chapter had announced an endeavour to define the type of song analysis required to decipher the myth Brel-Brassens-Ferré; what this chapter has demonstrated, is that song is, by nature, a greatly ‘appropriable’ genre and that under the growing influence of the media and through the emergence of new technologies, such as records, the radio, television (and today the Internet), the public has gradually increased its control over songs and expanded it over the singers. This means that the social function of singers and their work is becoming increasingly relevant to the study of modern society, and that in order to fully appreciate this social function, it is essential to analyse their interpretation by society, or what is termed in

⁹⁵ Marshall, p.58.

Chapter Three their 'media appeal'. This chapter, then, has defined the different windows that the public can open, in modern society, to manipulate and appropriate songs and artists; and the media help and encourage the public to open these windows.

The aim of the following chapter is therefore to analyse the ways in which society appropriates artists and the factors that contribute to the media appeal of artists. Through the analysis of the singers' personae, of their media profiles, and of their audience, the next chapter will then examine the 'intertextuality' (to refer back to Marshall's quote) of Brel, Brassens and Ferré in order to explore the circumstances and public feelings which have been involved in the creation of this social phenomenon.

Chapter 3: The media appeal of Brel, Brassens and Ferré

The present chapter will develop and compare the singers' relationship with the public. The word 'public', however, has to be taken here in all its meanings: it not only refers to the audience, but also to the implications of being a public figure, singing in public, and creating a work which has become public. The previous chapter has established that in order to understand the social significance of the trio, it is essential to explore what the singers meant and how they were represented in their own work, but also in the media. The aim of this chapter is to determine where and how the three singers fit in within the conjunction of factors that made them a legendary trio. Chapter One argued that the trio Brel-Brassens-Ferré was a sign in Barthesian terms, and that in order to fully appreciate the myth of the trio as a representation of Frenchness, this sign had to be analysed in detail. This is precisely what the present chapter does: it examines the sign Brel-Brassens-Ferré, but from the outside rather than from the inside; that is to say not from the perspective of a lyric, music, or author study, but from the perspective of the society that interpreted the sign, focusing, therefore, on the media appeal of the trio.

The first level of the singers' media appeal which this chapter will investigate, is their public profiles, that is to say how they came across in their songs and in the media. There are many common points between the three singers' public profiles and it might have been interesting to study them thematically; indeed, an analysis of Brel, Brassens and Ferré's 'personae' could have been articulated around three main poles: 'revolt', 'poetry', and 'authenticity'. However, treating the three singers separately is also useful in many respects, and it is this latter approach that the first part of this chapter has adopted; undertaking three individual studies of the singers gives a more global view of the evolution of the three 'personae' in relation to the themes of 'revolt', 'poetry', and

'authenticity'. It makes clear, for example, that whereas Brel and Ferré significantly evolved between the beginning and the end of their careers, Brassens' persona remained relatively stable; such an approach therefore brings an additional insight into the singers' characters as they might have been perceived by the public.

The 'personae' of the singers, then, which were greatly defined by the themes that they developed in their songs and by what they told the media about themselves, will first be analysed and compared with the media interpretation of these same personae. This will demonstrate major discrepancies between what the singers were, what they thought they were, and what they were thought to be. The problematic character of their personae will then be reinforced by the analysis of the singers' audiences. Although it is impossible to have an accurate idea of the exact composition of the audiences, a study of the 'mediated' audience (or the audience targeted by the broadcast) and of the 'assumed' audience of the singers (those for whom they intended to sing), will give a general idea of who might have listened to them. Finally, attention will be drawn to the ways in which these different elements affected the singers' public images and how they contributed to defining the values for which they were seen to stand.

A –The public profiles of Brel, Brassens and Ferré.

1) Ferré

Ferré is by far the most problematic character of the trio, to the extent that the contrast between what he was and what he was perceived to be gradually became a recurrent theme in his songs and interviews. His being misunderstood by the public was mainly

due to his choice of themes, images, and expression. At the heart of all the symbols, figures and themes developed by Ferré throughout his songs lies the essence of his work, which is the dynamic conflict between freedom and totalitarianism. Such a conflict is intrinsically problematic as the two objects of the conflict belong to two different realities: 'freedom' is an ideal, an abstract notion which can only be achieved – according to Ferré – spiritually; on the contrary, 'totalitarianism' is a social reality which corrupts the individual by replacing his/her natural instincts with social reflexes. Ferré's reaction against social oppression was therefore purely intellectual and spiritual, which many people, especially in the stirrings of May 68, failed to understand. The struggle in which he was engaged was deliberately desperate, and despair was indeed, for Ferré, the only lucid way of facing the world: 'Le désespoir est une forme supérieure de la critique' he claimed in *La Solitude*. In all his interviews and writings, he insisted strongly on the difference between 'anarchy', which he advocated, and 'anarchism', which he did not trust, explaining that 'anarchy' was a state of mind, whereas 'anarchism' was the political formulation of 'anarchy'. 'Anarchy' and 'revolution' were, for Ferré, mental attitudes: 'La révolution ça se fait petit à petit, au niveau de l'individu, forcément. Être bourgeois, c'est avoir des pantoufles, mais les avoir dans l'esprit.'¹

Ferré's work revolves around three main themes and their tributaries: 'anarchy', which can be expressed as 'social criticism', 'anticlericalism', and 'antimilitarism'; 'love', which appears in themes like 'women' and 'eroticism'; and 'poetry', which is expanded into discussions about language, the status of artists, music and its industry. These three themes, illustrated by Ferré throughout his work, have in common the fact that they all somehow embody the desperate conflict between freedom and

¹ 'Entretien avec Léo Ferré', *Rock & Folk*, January 1971.

totalitarianism: in Ferré's work, 'anarchy' is a mental revolution against social oppression, 'love' is a fantasy with the capacity to challenge social standards, and 'poetry' is an aesthetic aspiration which defies language and transcends social banality. His handling of such sensitive themes greatly contributed to earning Ferré the reputation of an abortive revolutionary, a misogynist, and a misanthrope; it also defined his public image around two definitions: 'Ferré the anarchist', and 'Ferré the romantic poet'.

a – Ferré the anarchist

Support for anarchic principles in Ferré's work can take a variety of forms. In his early songs – before 1956 – he tended to focus on describing the inadequacy of man in society: in songs like *La mauvaise graine* or *Graine d'ananar*, the narrator expressed his anger against a society that refused to understand him. He criticised the mind-destroying effects of capitalism in *Les passantes*: 'Le ventre au chaud les pieds sanglés de crocodile / *Das Kapital* prend son café au bar du coin / L'air effaré parmi la merde de la ville'. In *L'homme*, Ferré sang of the humdrum routine of a man whose only concern was to adapt to his milieu; his longing for anarchy was there conveyed by the description of the pathetic wandering of a man – or a fictional 'I' – in a mechanical world which he rejected. In several songs, Ferré even used the figure of Einstein to symbolise the dangers of a mechanical world governed by rules: 'Monsieur Einstein [...] a découvert des équations / Qui vont nous tomber sur la gueule' (*Y'en a marre*), 'Emme c^2 Emme c^2 / Aime-moi donc ta parallèle / Avec la mienne si tu veux / S'entrianglera sous mes ailes' (*La Mémoire et la Mer*).

In order to advocate intellectual freedom, Ferré often used the names of famous characters or politicians whom he believed symbolised oppressive authority, and

attacked them. This greatly influenced his public image and turned his persona into a politically rebellious figure, since each time he pronounced the name of De Gaulle, for example, he was thought to be engaging in politics, despite repeatedly insisting that his work was apolitical: ‘je ne suis pas un homme politique, je suis même à l’opposé. Il y a là une confusion: parce que je parle de choses actuelles, on dit que je fais de la politique. Eh merde!’² The confusion, however, is quite understandable, since a song like *Mon Général*,³ for example, in which the narrator is a Resistance fighter tortured by the Nazis, openly criticises De Gaulle’s lack of contact with his soldiers and people. In this song, the ‘Général’ symbolises the calculating rules that oblige men to go to war: ‘Je me souviens du petit bistro / De la Gare du Nord de votre photo / Que je portais comme une relique / Mon Général c’est peut-être idiot / Mais je ne sais plus trouver les mots / C’était peut-être quelque chose d’héroïque / Ah oui c’est ça ils m’ont emmené / Je crois bien que j’avais les points liés / Au fond qu’est-ce que ça peut vous faire’. De Gaulle is again alluded to several times in songs of the 1960s like *La gueuse*, *Ils ont voté*, *Sans façons*, *Salut Beatnik*, but the example of *Mon Général* clearly illustrates how Ferré became a problematic character: he had a precise idea of what he wanted to be and to stand for, and systematically blamed it on the public and the media if they received the wrong idea, regardless of whether he was himself responsible for their misinterpretation.

Through his songs, Ferré analysed his own vision of the world, his own conflict with society, and he accomplished a revolution according to his own criteria. It is true that he often mentioned many political or social events: he sang, for example, about De Gaulle, Algeria, Franco, the World Wars; but he always insisted on his own reactions to them, his own feelings about them, rather than on their political effects. He never

² ‘Entretien avec Léo Ferré’, *Rock & Folk*, January 1971.

³ The song was written in 1947 but was censored for fifteen years before being recorded on record in 1962.

advocated political change, he advocated intellectual change; this is why, for example, May 68 had such an influence on Ferré and his work, because although it was a political failure, the Revolution of May 68 was – for Ferré – an intellectual success:

On a l'habitude de dire que Mai 68 ça a avorté, mais ça n'est pas vrai du tout. Ça a été grandiose malgré tout. Ça ne pouvait pas réussir, bien sûr, car ce n'est pas avec des pavés et des inscriptions merveilleuses sur les murs qu'on fait la révolution. Pour faire la révolution, il faut convaincre les cons. C'est pourquoi ça n'est pas possible. Mais Mai 68 a changé bien des esprits.⁴

Among other targets used by Ferré to vent his anger against a world made of rules that people follow without questioning, were the French national anthem, voting, and religion, which reinforced the anarchic and rebellious characters of his persona. 'La Marseillaise', parodied in *La Marseillaise* (in Ferré's song, a prostitute from Marseilles) was for Ferré a devious way of comforting people in their idea that they all belonged to the same society, shared the same ideals, and that there was therefore no need to question the social system. Voting was equally devious as it meant admitting the predominance, and playing by the rules, of this social system which Ferré rejected. Religion was, for Ferré, inhibiting and hypocritical. One of his first songs, *Monsieur Tout Blanc*, written in 1949, openly denounced the silence of the Pope about the deportations of the Jews during the Second World War. The song was banned for a number of years, but Ferré still performed it in public, reinforcing his anti-establishment image.

The provocative aspect of his songs often led to his work being banned and contributed to defining Ferré both as a transgressive figure and a victim of 'authoritarian' censorship. In the early 1960s, press articles consolidated this image: in *Paris Presse*, Ferré was described as the 'oublié', since no company would record his songs;⁵ *Combat* entitled an article 'Léo Ferré prépare un disque interdit'.⁶ Ferré publicly

⁴ 'Entretien avec Léo Ferré', *Rock & Folk*, January 1971.

⁵ 'L'oublié', *Paris Presse*, 12 May 1960.

denounced the censorship of which he was a victim, and in an article entitled ‘Le poète semeur de bombes a vaincu la mafia de la chanson’, he targeted the hypocrisy of record companies which banned his songs only because they contained profanities.⁷

His fighting image was enhanced by his style of performance: he was always alone on stage, singing with aggressiveness and usually with a fist raised. A review in the *Canard Enchaîné*, in 1962, despite heavy irony, gives an idea of what Ferré’s performances were like: ‘L’index véhément, le regard fulgurant, les projecteurs, tout l’arsenal, c’est trop pour ce qui n’est après tout qu’une chanson. C’est beau, c’est grand, c’est généreux la chanson, mais c’est quand même pas la déclaration des droits de l’homme et du citoyen.’⁸ What this example illustrates is that whether Ferré was liked or disliked, it was always for the same reasons; and if his vehemence irritated some, it also found an echo in the future actors of May 68. Depending on the perspective, then, descriptions of the singer as spitefully angry or cantankerous could be either positive or negative. Similarly, although Ferré denied being a misanthrope, he never openly challenged his reputation as one, as if any qualifier preceded by the prefix ‘anti-’ or ‘mis-’ actually served his anti-authoritarian image; and the fact that he claimed to prefer animals to human beings became, in the media, another example of his disgust with society, and was therefore positively treated. An illustrative example of this is a 1965 article, favourable to Ferré, which was entitled: ‘Pour Léo Ferré, les bêtes comptent plus que les gens’;⁹ a few days before, Ferré had proudly told *Paris Presse*: ‘Je suis la seule institution que je respecte’.¹⁰

⁶ *Combat*, 19 January 1961.

⁷ *Paris Presse*, 27 January 1961.

⁸ ‘Léo Ferré à l’ABC’, *Le Canard Enchaîné*, 12 December 1962.

⁹ *Journal du dimanche*, 21 March 1965.

¹⁰ *Paris Presse*, 18 March 1965.

From the beginning of his career, Ferré's eloquence became increasingly raw and accusatory. An example of this is the multiplication, mentioned earlier, of direct references to politicians in the 1960s, which were perceived by the public as aggressive criticisms of the French political system – even though Ferré himself denied any formal political ambitions or goals. Another example is the directness of the songs and texts written at the end of the 1960s and straight after May '68: a few examples are *Ni Dieu ni Maître*; *L'été 68*; *L'anarchie est la formulation politique du désespoir*; *Les Anarchistes*; *L'oppression*. Towards the end of the 1960s, Ferré's dedication to his anarchist ideals remained very much alive, but the rawness of his exhortations also evolved, and he used the crudity of his language to explore another major and controversial theme of his work: 'love'.

b – Ferré the romantic poet

Although 'love' is a dominant theme in Ferré's work, none of his songs has ever become famous as a perfect example of the traditional love song. This is because Ferré did not write love songs, he wrote songs about love. He tried to capture the emotions instantaneously provoked by love rather than the sentiments people usually wrap around them. In his songs, love is a completely physical experience – although not exclusively a sexual one – because emotions are experienced physically. Capturing raw emotions often entailed using raw descriptions, and in songs like *Le plus beau concerto*, *Jolie Môme*, *Amria*, *C'est extra* or *Cette blessure*, the sensuous description of the female body was, for Ferré, the most efficient way to convey the instantaneity of love. Love is an experience of the senses, and so is the description of the woman; she is repeatedly compared with the sea, its smell, its taste, its shine and its smoothness. Moreover,

physical love – in the songs – often paved the way to transgressive love, as the overwhelming sensuality sometimes overshadowed the object of desire, who could be a prostitute (*Jolie môme*), or a very young girl (*Amria; Petite*).

Ferré endeavoured to appreciate the purity of love deprived from its social constraints and taboos; in his song *Petite*, for example, his desire for a young girl was not the real emphasis of the song: the emphasis was on the mental attitude of the transgressor who needed an excuse to shock, to break a taboo, and to infringe the penal code: ‘Tu reviendras me voir bientôt / Le jour où ça ne m’ira plus / Quand sous ta robe il n’y aura plus / Le Code Pénal.’ The same idea is illustrated by the respect Ferré showed to prostitutes; they are a symbol of unrestrained sexuality and of rebellion against social regulations, which means that the love they give is pure and uncorrupted. Transgressive love was therefore less an end in itself than an invitation to have a different and naked attitude towards love. This physical and immediate conception of love is present throughout the work of Ferré, and from his first songs to his last ones, eroticism was an essential device in his aesthetic achievements.

However, it is easy to understand how Ferré’s aesthetic intentions could be interpreted, by the public and the media, as misogyny and perversion; especially since, when discussing the subject, he tended to cloud the issue rather than clarify it. The language he used did nothing to avoid disturbing his audience. In *Ton style*, for example, he sang: ‘Ton style c’est ton cul c’est ton cul / Ton style c’est ma loi quand tu t’y plies salope!’ But when questioned by the media about his attitude towards women, he still proclaimed his love for them: ‘On dit que je suis misogyne. Oui, d’accord, dans le sens que le misogyne, c’est celui qui aime trop les femmes.’¹¹ Although this interview took place in the early 1980s, his distortion of the definition of misogyny is

¹¹ Catherine Degan ‘Quand Ferré “l’anar” enfonce les portes ouvertes: “c’est pas mal des fois le banal !”’, *Le Soir de Bruxelles*, 10 February 1981.

typical of the way in which he always manipulated his interviews; he turned ‘misogynist’ into a positive word, because being accused of ‘misogyny’ meant that he was considered to be – and was happy to be considered to be – in conflict with social standards.

As the following chapter will demonstrate, whether Ferré’s songs were actually misogynistic or not is debatable; but what is certain is that Ferré was, willingly or not, projecting conflicting ideas of his attitude towards women. For example, he repeatedly denounced marriage and advocated free love, like in *Il n’y a plus rien*, where he exhorted his listener: ‘Te marie pas!’, but at the same time, he himself married three times and talked very publicly of how important his second wife, Madeleine, had been for his career, and of how much he cherished the family which he built with his third wife, Marie-Christine. Ferré wanted to be an aggressive artist and a kind person; this is why he always insisted, in his interviews, on the fact that he was different from the narrators of his songs. In a 1970 interview, Ferré explained: ‘On a pris l’habitude de dire que je suis un type désagréable, impoli, que je reçois mal les gens, que j’envoie promener les journalistes... Je me souviens d’un reporter qui me rencontrait pour la première fois et qui n’en revenait pas. Il me répétait: “Mais, monsieur Ferré, vous êtes gentil!”’¹²

Ferré’s erotic songs played a significant part in complicating his public image. The songs were animated by his anarchic conception of women and of love, according to his own definition of ‘anarchy’; but whereas, when he described outrageous sex or used offensive language, he focused on an attitude, others – journalists, critics, the public – focused on the action and its implications. In an interview with Patrice Pottier in 1969, Ferré explained himself thus: ‘Il faut détruire ce qui ne convient plus. Mais

¹² Claude Obernai, ‘Léo Ferré en tête-à-tête’, *Femmes d’aujourd’hui*, n°1333, November 1970, p.110.

quand on me parle de reconstruire je réponds: moi je ne suis pas un architecte. C'est pas mon boulot.'¹³ He believed that social rules and taboos restrained love and had to be destroyed, so he destroyed them in his songs, but he offered no alternative to the chaos that came as a result: he did not reconstruct. The problem, though, was that in the late 1960s, people were looking more for answers than for questions and therefore sometimes read more into Ferré's songs that the singer would have liked.

There is something very Romantic about Ferré's focus on the attitude and his disregard for the object, which can also be understood as a reaction against the ascendancy of rational systems over the 'real' world. Ferré himself would not have denied a connection with the Romantics considering that throughout his work, he proclaimed his admiration for poets like Baudelaire, Rimbaud or Verlaine, and somehow appropriated their poems by setting them to music. A definition of Romanticism is that it is 'une quête sans graal'¹⁴; this could very well apply to Ferré's work, because his quest was his anarchic aspiration, but this aspiration was an aim in its own right: he aspired to anarchy but not to the real-life, political, consequences of anarchy – this is why he insisted so much on the difference between 'anarchy' and 'anarchism'. This of course does not mean that his aspiration lacked insight or that his quest was an abortive one, because Ferré's reasoning did achieve something, but it is an aesthetic achievement rather than a political or a sexual one. Ferré's aesthetic requirements are continuously expressed in his work through the recurrence of the themes relating to 'poetry', and more generally to 'art'.

The merging of the aspiration – or the quest – and of the achievement, is further illustrated by the fact that poetry was, for Ferré, both a medium and an objective. From

¹³ *Journal de Genève*, 5 May 1969.

¹⁴ 'romantisme', *Dictionnaire des littératures française et étrangères* (Paris: Larousse, 1985).

Ferré's Romantic perspective, poetry is both a tool used to foment a revolution, and the revolution itself. Hence, in his work, the extensive number of songs about poets, poetry or artists (*La muse en carte; Poètes... vos papiers!; Art Poétique; Les artistes; Les poètes; Les musiciens; etc.*) Ferré's objective was to take poetry to the street, by which he meant to make it accessible to everyone, but he also meant to use it as a weapon, like insurgents would use cobblestones; this is what he exhorted people to do in songs like *Les quat' cents coups, La Poésie est dans la rue, or Des armes.*

Ferré's art had therefore an aggressive and disturbing effect, but at the same time, it had no other motivation than that of actually being disturbing. Art, for Ferré, was a facet of anarchy and therefore had to be, by definition, unconventional and disturbing. This explains why so many of Ferré's songs were dedicated to criticising the prostitution of art; the two most famous examples being *Monsieur Barclay* and *À une chanteuse morte*, both censored for a number of years. *Monsieur Barclay*, which directly addresses Eddy Barclay, Ferré's own producer, denounces the mechanical production of musical hits: 'Monsieur Barclay / M'a demandé / Léo Ferré / J'veux un succès'. *À une chanteuse morte* is a tribute to Edith Piaf, but it also contains a criticism of the commercial songs of Mireille Mathieu, whom Ferré considered to be a product of the music industry that sacrifices music to business. As Barclay was the producer of both Ferré and Mathieu, he obviously prevented the song from coming out; but Ferré sued him, and his name was all over the newspapers in titles such as 'Léo Ferré s'en prend à Mireille Mathieu'.¹⁵ *Le Monde* even published details of the trial in January 1968; such publicity once more influenced Ferré's image, as the public saw in him a symbol of the rebellion against the negative effects of the music industry, and more generally a defender of authentic culture.

¹⁵ *Paris Jour*, 6 September 1967.

Ferré's determination to serve poetry and art were very much reflected in the press, and newspaper headlines often associated his name with a derivative of the word 'poetry'. In 1961, for example, *L'Humanité* published 'Léo Ferré, en chantant conduit les Poètes dans la Rue';¹⁶ an article in *Libération* was entitled: 'Gerbe de musique et de poésie. Le beau récital de Léo Ferré au théâtre du Vieux Colombier'.¹⁷ Having set, among others, Ruteboeuf, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Verlaine and Apollinaire to music, Ferré's name also became associated with theirs. His friendship with André Breton emphasised the singer's poetic legitimacy, as did the publishing of his and Aragon's complementary articles 'Aragon et la composition musicale' and 'Léo Ferré et la mise en chanson'.¹⁸

His romantic and surrealist connections once again illustrate that Ferré was an aesthetic militant, but not a political one. His insistence on not being a politician is essential, because he was aware that his ideas about anarchy, love, and poetry, were legitimate as far as the individual was concerned, not society. However, the line he drew between mental and political revolutions, despite being fundamental to him, was often blurred in the eyes of the public who always considered Ferré to be an active 'leftist'. In 1970, he told Norbert Lemaire: 'On me traite de gauchiste et en même temps d'anarchiste. Expliquez-moi comment un "anar" peut-il être politisé? On veut me voir cracher sur l'actualité alors que le seul quotidien m'intéresse.'¹⁹ It is true that Ferré was never dishonest with his public; he repeatedly claimed his status as an artist, and repeatedly explained that artists campaigned for intellectual – not political – autonomy. He clearly stated that his ideas were themselves their own finality when he abruptly

¹⁶ Georges Léon, *L'Humanité*, 27 January 1961.

¹⁷ *Libération*, 1 February 1961.

¹⁸ *Les Lettres françaises*, 19-25 January 1961.

¹⁹ Norbert Lemaire 'Léo Ferré: "je ne veux plus être un drapeau, même noir..."', *L'Aurore*, 10 November 1970.

declared in *Il n'y a plus rien*: 'J'envoie mes idées dans la rue, et je fais de l'argent avec elles'. In *L'Idole*, he called himself 'un chanteur qui chante la révolution', and directly warned his public: 'Regardez-moi bien, j'suis une idole' and 'Regardez-moi bien j'suis qu'un artiste'. Yet, as critic Serge Dillaz accurately pointed out in 1973, Ferré's public did not always understand his purely aesthetic motivations: 'Qu'arrivera-t-il lorsque les jeunes gens en colère, ceux que l'on qualifie habituellement de gauchistes, s'apercevront qu'ils se sont trompés en pensant venir écouter un leader politique? [...] Le public ne reconnaît pas volontiers s'être trompé, il préfère se persuader que la vedette lui a été infidèle.'²⁰

2) Brassens

Despite the very obvious differences in their styles, work, and contact with the media, Ferré and Brassens have in common that critics and journalists have attributed the same epithets to them. Both were called 'poets' and 'anarchists', to the extent that Brassens was even considered, as Chapter One has pointed out, to have 'stolen' Ferré's anarchic audience. Despite the similarity of their most recurrent qualifiers, however, Ferré and Brassens were poets and anarchists in very different ways. Whereas the media presented Ferré as an advocate of anti-authoritarianism, Brassens was never seen as a campaigning artist; he was an introverted anarchist, who kept to himself, without exhorting or even advising people. Brassens' anarchism took two different forms, both in his work and in the media: it expressed itself either through his anti-establishment ideas, in particular in songs that were sometimes perceived to have a political dimension, or through his image of a solitary and original character, at odds with

²⁰ Dillaz, Serge, *La Chanson française de contestation – Des barricades de la Commune à celles de mai 1968* (Paris: Seghers, 1973), p.168.

society. Although Brassens did set some poems to music, such a practice was far from being a priority for him, and whereas Ferré's poetic characteristics were for a great part due to the connection of his work to that of 'recognised' poets, Brassens was called a poet for the images he created and for his versification.

a – Brassens the man

Brassens' political commitment to anarchism should not be overstated. He did spend several years supporting the anarchist newspaper *Le Libertaire*, for which he wrote articles and worked as a proofreader, but as he explained in the 1969 interview: 'je faisais *Le Libertaire* en 1945-46-47, et je n'ai jamais complètement rompu avec, mais enfin, je ne milite plus comme avant –, et chacun avait de l'anarchie une idée tout à fait personnelle.'²¹ He did write some songs that had a political impact, but their number was comparatively limited, and they were not written early enough in his career to contribute to categorising him as a political singer. The most famous of Brassens' political songs were *Les deux oncles* and *La tondue*, written in 1964, and to a lesser extent *La guerre de 14-18* (1962), and *Mourir pour des idées* (1972). These songs were controversial, but not in the way an anarchist song is supposed to be controversial.

Les deux oncles, in particular, generated heated debates in the media about the integrity of Brassens' political ideas. In the song, the narrator compares the situations of his two uncles, Martin and Gaston, one of whom fought the war alongside the British, and the other one alongside the Germans; the narrator observes that both died, whereas he, who had not taken sides, is still alive. The idea at the heart of the song, as Brassens argued, is that it seems pointless to die for a country when just a few years later, the two

²¹ François-René Cristiani and Jean-Pierre Leloir, *Trois hommes dans un salon: Brel Brassens Ferré* (Paris: Fayard/Éditions du Verbe (chorus), 2003), p.40.

belligerents are reconciled and required to work together: '[Maintenant] que vos filles et vos fils vont la main dans la main / Faire l'amour ensemble et l'Europe de demain' (*Les deux oncles*). For a 1964 audience, however, Brassens' pacifist intentions were overshadowed by his juxtaposition of a Collaborator and a Resistance fighter. Left-wing newspapers, which traditionally supported Brassens, were outraged at what *L'Humanité* called the singer's 'faux-pas': 'Ce n'est certes pas de Brassens qu'on attendait cette glorification de l'attentisme, cette assimilation des bourreaux et de leurs victimes';²² *Libération* published a 'Lettre ouverte à Georges Brassens',²³ in which the son of a Resistance fighter expressed his disappointment at Brassens' song.

As this example illustrates, although Brassens only scarcely expressed what could be labelled as political ideas, when he did, they did not usually coincide with what the public expected him to think. Because of the anarchic resonance of his songs that ridiculed the Church and the police, the public wanted Brassens to be, to a certain extent, a defender of anarchist ideas. However, Brassens never publicly supported any form of political action, not even in May 68; when asked by journalists where he was during the May 68 events, he famously replied that he was busy making kidney stones. As Sara Poole observed: 'those who had expected some kind of statement from Brassens (at the time grappling with one of his recurrent kidney stones) during May 68 were again disappointed, unable to reconcile a known and admired anti-authoritarian stance with what they saw as an abnegation of all principles they held dear.'²⁴

Still, as Cristiani rightly pointed out in his 1969 interview, Brassens – as well as Brel and Ferré – '[a] flirté avec les mouvements anarchiste ou libertaire'²⁵. His character and his work undeniably had a political resonance which did influence his public

²² Gilbert Bloch, 'Un faux-pas de Brassens et une prouesse de Barbara', *L'Humanité*, 28 October 1964.

²³ 'Lettre ouverte à Georges Brassens', *Libération*, 19 November 1964.

²⁴ Sara Poole, *Brassens: Chansons* (London : Grant & Cutler, 2000), p. 32.

²⁵ Cristiani and Leloir, p.38.

perception, but the resonance was often circumstantial: Brassens never openly expressed any political views and very few of his songs were political per se; but in a war and post-war context, his ‘je-m’en-foutiste’ attitude had, for many, a political significance. For example, only four months after his début, the newspaper *France Soir* published an article entitled: ‘Deux soldats attaquent Georges Brassens chanteur antimilitariste’.²⁶ The two soldiers had been offended by the lines: ‘Le soir du quatorze juillet / Je reste dans mon lit douillet / La musique qui marche au pas / Cela ne me regarde pas’ (*La mauvaise réputation*). These lines are not, in themselves, particularly offensive, but they express a deliberate lack of admiration for the army, which, in the post-war context, could be interpreted as a sign of contempt for the soldiers who had fought for France.

Although Brassens never actually meant to be offensive nor did he claim to be an anarchist, his antimilitarist label, attached to him – as the above example has illustrated – since the beginning of his career, combined with the individualistic themes of his songs and his anti-authoritarian attitude, made him an anarchist by default. In November 1953, *Combat* entitled an article ‘Georges Brassens: archange-anar’,²⁷ and events illustrating his disregard for institutions were unfailingly reported in the media, such as, for example, his refusal to attend a lunch hosted by the President of the Republic.²⁸

Brassens, therefore, became an anarchist figure despite having never openly claimed to be one. Of course, his connections with *Le Libertaire* – first through his contribution to the paper and then through his concerts to support it – certainly influenced his anarchic image; but the most recurrent features emphasised by journalists

²⁶ Carmen Tessier, *France Soir*, 19 July 1952.

²⁷ Henri Magnan, ‘Georges Brassens: archange-anar’, *Combat*, 9 November 1953.

²⁸ ‘Le chanteur Georges Brassens refuse de déjeuner avec le Président de la République’, *France Soir*, 6 November 1953.

to illustrate their depictions of Brassens as an anarchist, rarely had anything political or activist to them. Most of them related to the singer's physical appearance, his behaviour, and that of his characters; in other words, they all related to the theme, omnipresent in Brassens' work, of the eccentric at odds with the social system.

The theme of the eccentric at odds with society is associated with Brassens in a variety of forms. The very first mention of his eccentricity was in connection with the way he looked, and more precisely with the maladjustment of his physical appearance with the musical profession: after his first performance in the famous cabaret *Chez Patachou*, in March 1952, he was described in *France Soir* as 'timide, apeuré', and lacking in 'présentation'.²⁹ This physical maladjustment, whose determining role in the singer's celebrity has been alluded to in Chapter Two and will be further examined in Chapter Four, characterised Brassens from the beginning to the end of his career.

The media described him as being shy, awkward on stage, sweaty, big, and shaggy-haired; but such descriptions, as well as comparisons between Brassens and woodcutters or bears, were always positive, since they served to emphasise the singer's authenticity. Seven months after his début, he was thus described in *Le Monde*: 'un garçon simple, presque fruste d'apparence, suant le trac à larges gouttes orangeuses, tirant après soi sa guitare lors de son entrée malhabile en scène comme un apprenti bûcheron sa cognée à l'orée d'un premier bois, hirsute de poil, flageolant du jarret et... pétri de talent'.³⁰ The image of Brassens as an unsophisticated peasant persisted throughout his career; he was described as 'timide, farouche, suant, mal embouché [...]

²⁹ 'Deux révélations chez Patachou: Georges Brassens et la maîtresse de maison dans son nouveau répertoire', 16-17 March 1952.

³⁰ Henri Magnan, 'Aux Trois Baudets Georges Brassens Troubadour gaillard', *Le Monde*, 2 October, 1952.

un bon gros camion de routier lancé à toute berzingue sur les chemins de la liberté’,³¹ or as a ‘grosse bête prise au piège des projecteurs’.³² *Les Nouvelles Littéraires* wrote in 1957 that: ‘Toujours bourru, sympathique, il demeure excellent poète, avec son air de paysan endimanché, sa guitare sous le bras et un refrain persifleur aux lèvres’;³³ and in 1961, *Le Monde* referred to Brassens’ ‘belle gueule de grizzli grisonnant’.³⁴

Brassens’ rough physical appearance matched, for the media, the rawness of his voice, of his feelings, and of the values of individual freedom that he defended in his songs: ‘La voix de ce gars est une chose rare et qui perce les coassements de toutes ces grenouilles du disque et d’ailleurs. Une voix en forme de drapeau noir, de robe qui sèche au soleil, de coup de poing sur le képi’;³⁵ or again in 1957: ‘On savait que cet ours suant à grosses gouttes en scène, semblant ignorer le public, buvant des verres d’eau entre deux couplets, avait quitté volontairement ses chiens fous et son perroquet bavard pour aller dire au public ce qu’il avait sur le cœur’.³⁶ This description of Brassens on stage is quite a typical one, and the few video recordings of the singer’s concerts confirm his awkwardness. In the recording of his 1972 concert at Bobino,³⁷ for example, Brassens does not address the audience once – outside the songs of course – he smiles at his own jokes, and is clearly unsure of how to respond to the audience’s applause.

The image of Brassens as a wild and surly person was reinforced by his way-of-life. Since the end of the war, Brassens had lived with Jeanne – a friend of his aunt with whom he had an ambiguous relationship – and her husband Marcel, in a small house in the *Impasse Florimont*, without water or electricity. When he started earning money,

³¹ René Fallet, ‘Allez Georges Brassens’ *Le Canard enchaîné*, 29 April 1953.

³² Claude Sarraute, ‘Georges Brassens et Christian Méry à Bobino’, *Le Monde*, 1 February 1956.

³³ ‘La piste et la scène’, *Les Nouvelles littéraires*, 10 October 1957.

³⁴ Claude Sarraute, ‘Georges Brassens à l’Olympia’, *Le Monde*, 8 November 1961.

³⁵ René Fallet, ‘Allez Georges Brassens’ *Le Canard enchaîné*, 29 April 1953.

³⁶ Serge, ‘Georges Brassens à l’Olympia’, *Les Nouvelles littéraires*, 23 May 1957.

³⁷ *Elle est à toi cette chanson – Georges Brassens*, coffret 3 DVD édition limitée, DVD Vidéo, Mercury, Universal Music, 2004.

Brassens did not move out for fear of upsetting the couple who had supported him for so long, and carried on living very simply until 1966.³⁸ This was regularly alluded to in the media, and often used as an illustration of Brassens' disinterested generosity and simplicity. Brassens' life, therefore, was in accordance with the values he advocated in his songs; and although the media and the public were aware that Brassens was neither a gorilla, nor a woodcutter, nor a relentless womaniser, the frontiers between his public image, his persona, and his characters always remained blurred. The consequence of this was that on the one hand Brassens' public profile evolved with the themes of his songs, but on the other hand, his songs became increasingly prisoners of his public image.

b – Brassens through his songs

The songs written in the first ten years of Brassens' career are relatively uniform in terms of themes and style. It is during this period that Brassens laid the foundations of the themes which he would develop throughout his life. *La mauvaise réputation* (1952), one of his first creations, gave the tone of his entire work: the song claimed the right to follow 'les chemins qui ne mènent pas à Rome' – a right all the more legitimate since, as the song argues, it harms no one. From the very first songs, Brassens presented himself as an independent and autonomous character, who did not live his life according to the way in which society expected him to behave. Brassens' persona therefore has a sense of values, but not of traditional values. He respects a morality that is humanist, since it is founded on respect for human beings, but it is a personal morality rather than a universal and conventional one. In his songs, Brassens questioned traditional values

³⁸ Jacques Vassal, *Brassens: le regard de 'Gibraltar'* (Paris: Fayard/Chorus, 2006), p.203.

and created his own morality through which he wished to give men and women a fair and more human place in society. His utopian aspirations and his non-conformist position gave his songs anti-authoritarian echoes, but his anti-authoritarianism was always purely ideological and deprived of aggressiveness or deliberate offence.

Anti-authoritarianism is a theme that appears in Brassens' songs in a variety of forms. It manifests itself, for example, in the contempt which the author's persona expresses against those whom he calls ironically 'les gens honnêtes'; following 'les chemins qui ne mènent pas à Rome' is another way of declaring one's preference for a simple life, criticising the symbols of authority, or despising any kind of religious commitment, which is precisely the attitude of Brassens' persona. Whether it be *Jeanne* (1953), or *Pauvre Martin* (1954) who worked himself to death and dug his own grave, the characters praised in the songs are always notable for their simplicity. This praise of simplicity can be considered as an implicit criticism of a capitalist world increasingly focused on money and success, but it is above all a means to celebrate the simple values that are life, love and tenderness. These values, in Brassens' songs, often have an after-taste of sin (*Il suffit de passer le pont*, *Les bancs publics*, *Margot*, *J'ai rendez-vous avec vous*), as if the infringement of religious rules added to their nobility.

Throughout his work, Brassens denounced people who unquestioningly let life happen to them and whose only motto was to do as everybody else: he sarcastically called these people 'braves' or 'honnêtes', since this is how they are seen by society. The 'braves gens' also appeared in the songs under the name of 'croquants', as in *L'Auvergnat*, for example, or of 'passants honnêtes' in *Les bancs publics*. These are terms that appeared in the early songs but which can be found again throughout the singer's work, as if, by laying the foundations of his fundamental themes, he also laid the basis of his personal lexicon, which grew gradually with each new song, and of his

typical characters. Thus, each time Brassens alluded to a judge or a policeman, the public knew straight away that the character would be stupid and ridiculous; similarly, when a poor manual worker was depicted, the public knew that he would be good and generous. This, of course, added to Brassens' predictability and strengthened the reciprocal influence between his songs and his public image: for the public, Brassens became indissociable from his personal mythology, and – as the examples of *Les deux oncles* and *La tonduie* have illustrated – deviations from the pattern he had set were badly received. Brassens was assimilated, advisedly or not, with the eccentric characters of his songs, and was expected to comply with the implications of this, both as a person and as a songwriter.

One of the elements which distinguishes Brassens' persona from the 'honest people', is the non-respect of traditions, and in particular of religious and republican traditions. Several of his songs are indeed disrespectful of such institutions as marriage, the *Marseillaise*, and other symbols of the Republic. In *Le gorille*, for example, the narrator's sympathy goes with the old lady who would happily let the gorilla seduce her; even though the song is highly ironical, Brassens presents himself as a defender of an unrestrained, unconventional, and above all unregulated sexuality. A similar idea is expressed in *Les Bancs publics* (1953), in which the narrator despises the disapproving looks that 'honest people' give to lovers kissing on public benches. In *La Première fille* (1954), the disrespect is double since the narrator explains that the memory of one's first sexual experience overshadows all historical memories: whether the girl was a prostitute or an honest woman, she leaves more memories than the 'campagnes d'Austerlitz et de Waterloo'. It is important to observe, however, that when Brassens mocks religious or republican values, he does not so much criticise them as the rigidity

with which they are enforced. His songs usually adhere to ideals of justice and equality, which are republican ideals, but at the same time, they reject the fact that the Republic dictates and imposes a history, a memory, and obligations onto these ideals. Throughout his career, Brassens asserted his desire not to admire and respect things only by principle: he sang against the death penalty, asserted his contempt for war, mocked judges, policemen, and priests, and happily accepted his reputation of ‘voyou’ (*Je suis un voyou*, 1954). All this, however, defined Brassens as somebody who went on in his own sweet way, rather than as a determined protester.

The same apparent nonchalance can be found in the way in which Brassens dealt with death in his songs. Death is a recurrent theme in Brassens’ work and is usually combined with the theme of the solitary, eccentric character. Death, in his songs, is an omnipresent threat that haunts the characters, as in *Le Fossoyeur* or *Pauvre Martin*. It can be cruel and inevitable, or it can be laughed at and ridiculed; but in both cases it emphasises the eventual solitude of man, and consequently the vanity of society, which again reinforces the individualistic ideals of Brassens’ persona and earned the singer the reputation of an old bear. However, if death was, for Brassens, a way through which to defy society, it also served an aesthetic purpose. In an interview, when asked about the reasons why death was such an omnipresent theme in his work, he explained that it was not only a theme, but also an aesthetic device: ‘Dans *Les Funérailles d’antan*, par exemple, je me sers de la mort comme prétexte, elle est là comme ça, exactement comme une marguerite dans une histoire d’amour’.³⁹

³⁹ ‘Brel et Brassens: Quelques vérités sur nous-mêmes et les autres’, *L’Express*, 3 January 1966, p. 31. Extract of an interview broadcast on Europe 1 in January 1966.

The aesthetic qualities of Brassens' work were highlighted by journalists from early on in his career, which contributed to the rapid classification of the singer as a 'poet'. After one of his first public performances, *France Soir* described Brassens thus: 'Ce poète, quelque peu révolutionnaire, nous apporte une bouffée d'air frais. Ses poèmes mis en chanson ont un son nouveau'.⁴⁰ However, until Brassens' work appeared in the Seghers collection *Poètes d'aujourd'hui* in 1963, the legitimacy of calling his songs poems was never questioned or discussed: recognising the poetic dimension of the songs seemed to be nothing more than an honour, in recognition of their high quality. The main quality of Brassens' songs, according to his reviewers, was that they were original while at the same time being reminiscent of a troubadour tradition. In 1957, his work was described as 'une note nouvelle dans l'art de la chanson populaire', with a 'volonté de tirer la chanson de l'ornière';⁴¹ the same magazine thus described him a few months later: 'Ami des déshérités, des errants, il mène sur scène le combat contre la sottise et l'hypocrisie, et on le devine fort proche, par instants, ce baladin du terroir, des ménestrels qui allaient jadis de villages en châteaux'.⁴² *Le Monde* described Brassens' songs as being a 'chant narratif toujours, d'où l'aphorisme, l'idée reçue, le poncif, sont soigneusement exclus au profit d'une poésie descriptive et agissante, celle des fabliaux'.⁴³ Comparisons with fabliaux were recurrent and fruitful since they simultaneously de-vulgarised the crude vocabulary of the songs, and justified the use of the term 'poetry' to describe Brassens' work. As *Le Monde* insisted, Brassens' 'principal mérite est de ne pas confondre

40 'Deux révélations chez Patachou', *France Soir*, 16-17 March 1952.

41 Serge, 'Georges Brassens à l'Olympia', *Les Nouvelles littéraires*, 23 May 1957.

42 Serge, 'La piste et la scène', *Les Nouvelles littéraires*, 10 October 1957.

43 Claude Sarraute, 'Georges Brassens à l'Olympia', *Le Monde*, 8 November 1961.

gauloiserie et vulgarité'.⁴⁴ Brassens did have detractors who disagreed with this, such as Maurice Ciantar, for example, who confessed in *Combat* that he left a Brassens concert 'heurté, d'un point de vue esthétique, poétique, et moral';⁴⁵ but for a majority of reviewers, calling Brassens a poet and a troubadour was unproblematic.

Four years after his works appeared in the Seghers collection, in 1967, Brassens was awarded the 'Grand prix de poésie de l'Académie Française'. These two events stimulated heated debates about whether or not Brassens' work could be considered as poetry. The newspaper *Combat* declared plainly: 'L'Académie Française vient de se couvrir de ridicule en décernant son grand prix de poésie à Georges Brassens',⁴⁶ but the Académie defended its decision by arguing: 'c'est par des chansons que commence toute histoire de la poésie. Aussi, en récompensant un de ceux que jadis on appelait ménestrels, n'avons-nous pas le sentiment de céder au caprice d'une mode, mais au contraire de renouer une tradition qui remonte aux premiers âges de notre langue'.⁴⁷ As well as reinforcing the poetic dimension of Brassens' persona, such headlines also made commonplace the association of Brassens and his work with debates about the nature of song and poetry; Chapter Four will discuss in more detail the extent to which Brassens (and Brel and Ferré) can be said to have contributed to the democratisation of culture, but it can already be observed that triggering debates about poetry in the media is a significant contribution to the popularisation of the art.

Debates about Brassens' poetic status mainly took place in the media, but what is interesting is that they ended up influencing the singer's work. Brassens himself claimed the legacy of medieval poetry, and did not wait until 1966 to assert his

⁴⁴ Henri Magnan, 'Aux Trois Baudets Georges Brassens Troubadour gaillard', *Le Monde*, 2 October 1952.

⁴⁵ Maurice Ciantar, 'Georges Brassens à l'Olympia', *Combat*, 10 October 1955.

⁴⁶ Alain Bosquet, 'Brassens? Pourquoi pas Fernandel', *Combat*, 10 June 1967.

⁴⁷ R. Clair, 'Le rire de Brassens', Allocution à l'occasion de la remise du Grand Prix de la poésie, *Les Nouvelles littéraires*, 28 December 1967.

admiration for the medieval poet François Villon. He also admitted having studied the poets meticulously, in particular La Fontaine, Baudelaire, and Hugo. But it does seem that from the end of the 1950s onwards, when his style and status were increasingly the subjects of public debate, his songs became more self-conscious in relation to what the media and the public saw in them.

In 1958, Brassens wrote a song that announced a change in his traditional themes: *Le Pornographe*. The song is a humorous reflection on the crude vocabulary that he uses in his songs, and by calling himself the ‘pornographe du phonographe’, he explicitly takes into consideration the public’s reaction to his songs. Similarly, *Le Moyenâgeux*, written in 1966, is a commentary on his medieval influences, in which he expresses regret not to have lived ‘au temps de François Villon’. By the end of the 1950s, Brassens had acquired the status of public figure, and it influenced his songs.

From this period onwards, different themes appeared in his songs that testified to a more self-conscious communication with the public. This evolution is also illustrated by the gradually increasing number of cultural references that can be found in Brassens’ songs. As Peter Hawkins observed, with time, ‘the literary and classical allusions become more and more frequent. By the time he recorded this last album, his style has become a little self-conscious, and the implied audience is clearly educated and intellectual, in contrast to the simplicity of the early songs’.⁴⁸ Cultural references abound in the early songs, but a detailed study of the texts demonstrates that with time, the references became less self-evident and required more effort and education from the public.

⁴⁸ Peter Hawkins, *Chanson: The French Singer-Songwriter from Aristide Bruant to the Present Day* (Aldershot and Burlington, USA: Ashgate, 2000), p.132.

Brassens' public profile, as with Ferré's, was influenced by his personal life, his work and the media. In the cases of both singers, there has been a discrepancy between who they were as people, and who they were thought or expected to be by the public. But unlike Ferré, Brassens did not really care about publicity and never spent much of his energy fighting for his public image; he rather tended to assimilate what was said about him and use it in his songs. Brassens once explained that he was so much of an anarchist that he always crossed the street on pedestrian crossings, to make sure he would not have to deal with the police;⁴⁹ his attitude with the public and the media was the same: he rarely commented on what the media said about him, almost as if to make sure that he would not be asked to justify himself and would be left in peace. Such a lack of interest in his own media profile played in his favour for two reasons: firstly, because his silence meant that the public was rarely contradicted and therefore perceived Brassens as a 'nice' person, and secondly, because his lack of interest in his own celebrity enhanced the public sentiment that his only passion was his work, which greatly increased his reputation of an 'authentic' artist.

3) Brel

Brel's public profile evolved in parallel with his career, which means that from his debut in 1953 until his death in 1978, it changed dramatically. Contrary to Brassens and Ferré whose careers started relatively late, Brel left Brussels to become a singer at the age of 24, with a middle-class Catholic education and very little experience. As his biographers never fail to mention, one of his few performances as a singer had been a

⁴⁹ Pierre Barlatier and Martin Monestier, *Brassens, le livre du souvenir* (Paris: Sand & Tchou, 1982), p.177.

competition in Knokke-le-Zoute, in 1953, in which he had finished last.⁵⁰ At the beginning of his career, then, Brel was no more than an inexperienced novice singer, to whom the media did not dedicate many columns. Browsing through the occurrences of Brel's name on the radio and television between 1954 and 1956 suggests that if his name was mentioned, it was merely to acknowledge the authorship of a song sung by his interpreters, or as part of the advertising of cabarets in which he was singing.⁵¹ Brel, therefore, did not become a public figure until the late 1950s, and it was not until his concert at the Olympia concert hall, in 1961, that he finally got rid of his reputation of 'abbé Brel'⁵² and became an influential artist.

a – The early years

A diachronic study of Brel's songs can only evidence the apparently heterogeneous nature of his work. From his earliest songs in 1953 to his last album in 1977, the tone, voice and performance of the singer evolved, while the songs as well as their themes gained in depth and professionalism. Critics, as Stéphane Hirschi observed, are unanimous on the subject: 'Il est en effet convenu dans toutes les études sur Brel d'opposer ses œuvres de jeunesse, aux allures d'un prêchi-prêcha boy-scout débordant de bons sentiments et de plates généralités, à ses chansons abouties, où les mêmes aspirations s'incarnent et vivent dans des personnages [...] pathétiques [...], avec leur angoisse peinte sous différents éclairages'.⁵³ The tone of Brel's early songs has

⁵⁰ *Chorus: les cahiers de la chanson n°25: Spécial Jacques Brel* (Brézolles: Les Éditions du Verbe, Autumn 1998), p.73.

⁵¹ This information can be obtained through the study of the database of the Paris Institut National de l'Audiovisuel.

⁵² See p.25 for detail.

⁵³ Stéphane Hirschi, *Jacques Brel, chant contre le silence* (Paris: Librairie Nizet, coll. chanteurs-poètes n°2, 1995), p. 14.

similarly been described by Alan Clayson as ‘pastoral softness’,⁵⁴ and by Brunshwig, Calvet, and Klein as having a ‘nette inspiration catholique’,⁵⁵ which greatly contrasts with the acerbic style for which Brel is now remembered.

Among Brel’s early songs, many are indeed wrapped in a bucolic atmosphere in which boys and girls play happily, in a world that they see as beautiful and full of kindness. Songs like *Il y a* (1953), or *La Foire* (1953), celebrate simple happiness where good and evil clearly contrast; the loved woman is often called ‘ma mie’, which adds to the pastoral tone, even giving it a vaguely medieval ring in some songs. Twenty-year-old Brel sang with the naïve optimism of his youth; he expressed his faith in humanity with simplicity, inviting his audience to watch ‘Ce qu’il y a de beau / Le ciel gris ou bleuté / Les filles au bord de l’eau’ (*Il nous faut regarder*, 1953). The pastoral tone of the songs is often coupled with a religious inspiration, as in *Pardons* (1956) or *Prière païenne* (1957); but this is arguably less due to the author’s personal convictions than to the influence of his education. Before moving to Paris, Brel’s social life indeed amounted to the scout-like movement, *la franche cordée*, through which he met his wife and first tried his performing talents. Brel’s early songs are reminiscent of the values of love, fraternity, and tolerance that he was taught and in which he believed, but it is true that the way he had to express them was often tinged with excessive sentimentality.

It is not surprising, then, that Brel was, as it were, absent from the media for the first few years of his career. This period, however, was interesting for journalists and biographers in retrospect, since, as will be discussed later in further detail, it was an essential step in Brel’s never-ending journey of learning and trying. In 1956, Brel started working with François Rauber who became his official orchestrator, and in

⁵⁴ Alan Clayson, *Jacques Brel – The Biography* (Chessington, Surrey: Castle Communications plc., 1996), p. 23.

⁵⁵ Chantal Brunshwig, Louis-Jean Calvet and Jean-Claude Klein, *Cent ans de chansons française* (Paris: Seuil, Points séries, 1981).

1958, pianist Gérard Jouannest joined the team. These two collaborations contributed to improving Brel's style, and although his first success, *Quand on n'a que l'amour* (1956) was written by Brel alone, the two other successes that helped him get rid of his reputation of 'abbé Brel', *La Valse à mille temps* and *Ne me quitte pas* (1959) owed much to Jouannest and Rauber's musical skills.

b – The 1960s

The turning point of Brel's career was indisputably his first concert at the Olympia concert-hall in October 1961. Although, as some journalists have observed, his religious convictions had not completely left him, he had found enough dynamism on stage to impose himself as a 'fighting' artist. *Le Monde* reminded his readers that Brel used to be a member of a youth movement and remarked that: 'Sa foi, depuis, ne l'a pas quitté, ni sa colère devant les folies meurtrières de l'époque, ni son amour du prochain, ni son espoir de voir un jour s'instaurer un ordre plus humain. Sa conviction est telle, telle la sincérité de son émotion, qu'il force l'adhésion, et le respect dû à tout ce qui tient au cœur, à tout ce qui en vient.'⁵⁶ Similarly emphasising the singer's energy, *L'Express* thus described the elements of Brel's success: 'Du punch et de l'humour, de la voix et du cœur, de la démagogie, mais de la tendresse, des procédés, mais des bons. Ce bourgeois belge, fils de bourgeois belges, fustige les bourgeois quels qu'ils soient de belle façon'.⁵⁷ After the Olympia concert, the media started to acknowledge that despite a few Boy Scout residues, Brel had evolved and made a name for himself.

The tone of Brel's more accomplished songs is indeed very different from that of the earlier ones. Gradually, he gave up traditional love songs and pastoral scenes; he

⁵⁶ Claude Sarraute, 'Brel ou le triomphe de la vertu', *Le Monde*, 17 October 1961.

⁵⁷ Danièle Heymann 'Mucis-hall – les dix grands', *L'Express*, 26 October 1961.

remained faithful to his values of love, humanity and tolerance, but he started expressing them as a man rather than as a priest. His tone definitely changed, but critics have debated whether the themes of the songs also changed, or whether they remained the same and were simply presented differently. Jean Clouzet, who is the first critic to have analysed Brel's work seriously, considers that the ideas defended by Brel in his early songs are constantly re-exploited in the later ones (Clouzet's study having been published in 1964, he obviously only takes into account the songs created prior to this date).⁵⁸ According to Clouzet, then, experience refined Brel's skills, and he managed, with time, to learn to dress up his ideas in order to make them more consistent and more efficient as songs. At the beginning of his career, Brel expressed raw ideas which, delivered in three minutes on a feigned medieval note, could sound naïve and colourless. But after a few years, having gained experience and acquired a spiritual and intellectual autonomy, Brel was better able to adapt his ideas to the requirements of the *chanson* genre. As Clouzet observed, an abstract idea, such as love or tolerance, cannot be efficiently developed in a three-minute song. So Brel learnt to put these three minutes at the service of the ideas he wanted to express: he staged them, integrated them into a story, flanked them with a music which, in three minutes, found an echo in his public.

From Clouzet's perspective, then, the ideas developed in the early songs were raw ideas, awkwardly presented to the public, whereas the more accomplished songs were like parables that would make the ideas less abstract, more accessible, while at the same time giving them more depth. Clouzet's argument can also be supported by the fact that the more Brel matured as an artist, the more his songs took the shape of little stories (*L'Ivrogne*, 1961; *Madeleine*, 1962; *La Fanette*, 1963; *Amsterdam* 1964; *Le*

⁵⁸ Jean Clouzet, *Jacques Brel* (Paris: Seghers, 'Poètes d'aujourd'hui', 1964).

dernier repas, 1964; *Mathilde* 1964). The argument of the parable-song is all the more defensible since Brel's most successful songs, such as *Ne me quitte pas* (1959), *Les Flamandes* (1959), *Les Bourgeois* (1961), or *Les Bigotes* (1962), were also the most complex ideologically. *Ne me quitte pas*, for example, denounces the weakness of a man who cannot find his way out of his unreciprocated love for a woman. *Les Flamandes* and *Les Bigotes* are not criticisms specifically targeted at Flemish or sanctimonious women; rather, they are general denunciations against those who give up their intelligence and freedom for an ideology or a tradition. Similarly, *Les Bourgeois* is not viscerally anti-middle-class; the song is more a criticism of the idle behaviour of comfortable people who disown the revolutionary impulses of their youth. The themes of failure, unreciprocated love, and the guilty passivity of human beings were already present in Brel's early songs, such as in *La Haine*, *Sur la place*, or *Il pleut*; but once integrated into a little story of daily life and expressively impersonated, these themes take a more real dimension and therefore become more cruel and frightening.

The key element of Brel's 'transformation' was therefore, besides maturity as an artist, a change of style, and more particularly, a change in the way in which he delivered his songs. As has already been mentioned in Chapter Two, Brel became famous for the physical energy he put into his performances; being sick before each concert, leaving a pool of sweat on the stage, and a facial expression that distorted his face, all became an integral part of his work. As he gained experience, Brel learnt to assimilate the feelings and emotions of his songs and then to incarnate them on stage. This was what appealed to the media and what they praised him for, from 1961 to the end of his career. In an article in 1962, in which he compared various singer-songwriters of the time, Alain Bosquet wrote that Brel was 'l'un des êtres qui assument sans pitié l'état sensible de notre époque, en lui donnant sa vraie dimension tragique et

palpitante. Il ne se révolte pas impunément: il désespère.’ Continuing on the comparison, he then added: ‘Les autres ricanent, se revêtent de désinvoltures élégantes ou de blasphèmes faciles: Jacques Brel lutte avec Dieu et il parle de la mort non point comme d’une mélancolie à venir, mais comme d’un horrible combat.’⁵⁹

As the above example illustrates, the exceptionality of Brel’s songs was due to the passion he put into them and to his total dedication to his audience when on stage. His passion was also the main quality which justified and legitimised his rise to the status of poet, when, in 1964, his work was published in the ‘Poètes d’aujourd’hui’ collection. Claude Sarraute, commenting on the event and on Brel’s performance at the Olympia in October 1964, wrote in *Le Monde*: ‘Je crois n’avoir jamais vu un triomphe comparable à celui-là. Même Johnny Halliday [sic] laisse les gens plus froids. Quand Brel parut, après l’entracte, dès les premiers accords le silence se fit, impressionné et impressionnant. [...] Jacques Brel poète d’aujourd’hui a enfin la cote qu’il mérite’.⁶⁰ In 1964, then, Brel is the third singer-songwriter, after Ferré and Brassens, to become a ‘poète d’aujourd’hui’, despite his obvious lack of connection with ‘established’ poets. Ferré and Brassens had set poets to music, and some of their verse testified to the influence of the Romantics; but with Brel, to use again Dimitris Papanikolaou’s observation, ‘poetry has become a general atmosphere’.⁶¹

Clouzet, in his introduction to Brel’s songs in the ‘Poètes d’aujourd’hui’ collection, argued that Brel had always been seeking a Wild-West, and that, having failed to find one, built his own through his songs.⁶² It is true that the Wild-West is a recurrent theme in Brel’s songs and that he was involved in his work, as in everything

⁵⁹ Alain Bosquet, ‘Jacques Brel’, *Combat*, 11 December 1962.

⁶⁰ Claude Sarraute, ‘Jacques Brel à l’Olympia’, *Le Monde*, 17 October 1964.

⁶¹ Dimitris Papanikolaou, *Singing Poets: Literature and Popular Music in France and Greece* (London: Legenda, 2007), p.46.

⁶² Jean Clouzet, *Jacques Brel*, (Paris: Seghers, collection Poètes d’aujourd’hui, 1964), p.21.

else, as in an adventure. What was romantic and poetic about Brel was himself and the way he was seen by the public to live his life. Peter Hawkins accurately analysed the ‘myth of Brel’:

He constantly followed through his romantic dreams by putting them into practice, launching into a career as a singer, learning to be an aircraft pilot, which he managed in the 1960s, becoming a film director, buying a yacht and sailing around the world, settling on a remote tropical island. All these achievements are the stuff of dreams, aspirations that remain no more than that for the majority of people; yet Brel had the force of character to carry them all through. This is the essence of the myth of Brel.⁶³

This ‘myth’ of Brel was very much conveyed in the media. Brel loved adventure stories and repeatedly confessed to the media his admiration for authors like Jules Verne, Cervantes, or Jack London. His enthusiasm was, as a result, often associated with the names of such authors: ‘Le grand secret de Brel: après Cervantès, Jules Verne’.⁶⁴ In 1967, when asked about his childhood, Brel mentioned the influence that London’s novels had had on his creativity and his need to search for ‘un ailleurs’ or a ‘Far-West’.⁶⁵ Such literary associations became even more frequent from 1968, when Brel decided to adapt an American musical based on *Don Quixote* into French. The result, *L’homme de la Mancha*, was a triumph and greatly added to Brel’s reputation as an adventurer Don Quixote.

Brel was indeed, for the media and his public, an adventurer; this was of course true after 1966, when he gave up song recital to produce a musical, films, and to go travelling around the world, but it was already true when Brel was a full-time singer. Adventure and discovery were always an integral part of Brel’s life and work. In 1965, *Paris Jour* announced that ‘Après son retour aux sources Brel part pour un grand voyage’,⁶⁶ and his songs, from the earliest to the last, expressed a profound need for and

⁶³ Hawkins, p.145.

⁶⁴ *Paris Presse*, December 1968.

⁶⁵ INA, ‘Entretiens avec Jacques Brel’, France Culture, 16 July 1967.

⁶⁶ *Paris Jour*, 01 February 1965.

attraction to adventure. In an early song such as *La haine*, for example, adventure is already present: in the song, he announces a departure to sea ('Comme un marin je partirai'), which he accomplished himself a few years later, as he sang in *La Cathédrale* in 1977: 'Et voici le Pacifique / Longue houle qui roule au vent'.

Brel's public image was also influenced by another aspect of his personality, closely linked to his adventurous character, which was his insatiable desire to learn. His life motto was 'Il faut aller voir'; he always wanted to discover new experiences, try new adventures, learn new skills. As has been mentioned earlier, one of the differences between Brel and Brassens and Ferré, was that Brel trained himself as a singer in public. In contrast to Brassens and Ferré, whose early songs were as polished and successful as the later ones, Brel spent the first few years of his career finding himself and learning how to make good songs. For Brel, everything had to be a discovery, and what interested him most was therefore the learning process; this is why when he considered that he had learned everything he could learn from song-making, he decided to give up and try a new adventure. His decision to give up song recital, at the height of his fame, caused quite a stir in the media, and confirmed Brel's honest and adventurous character. Headlines such as 'Jacques Brel ou la liberté à tout prix'⁶⁷ or 'Jacques Brel: Il me faut une autre aventure'⁶⁸ abounded in many newspapers. When asked why he was giving up singing, in an interview in 1966, Brel replied: 'J'ai envie de faire autre chose. J'ai envie de vivre et d'apprendre des choses. [...] Je suis un aventurier, j'ai besoin de liberté'.⁶⁹

Another reason he used to give when asked about his abandonment of song recitals was that it had become too automatic and that he did not want to be dishonest with his audience; in an interview on *France Culture* in 1967, Brel confirmed to Dominique Arban: 'si je continue, je vais recevoir plus que je ne peux donner, je ne le

⁶⁷ *Combat*, 6 October 1966.

⁶⁸ *L'Humanité*, 6 October 1966.

⁶⁹ INA, 'Panorama', Channel 1, 14 October 1966.

veux pas parce que ce serait malhonnête'.⁷⁰ Marc Robine, in his biography of Brel, describes Brel's decision thus: 'C'est à Laon, dans l'Aisne, au début de l'été 1966, que se produit l'incident qui emportera la décision définitive de Jacques. Il est en train d'interpréter "Les vieux", le cinquième titre du programme, quand il réalise soudain qu'il a déjà chanté le couplet qu'il débite machinalement'.⁷¹

His song-learning process over, Brel decided to learn to sail, pilot, produce a musical, become an actor, and direct films. He came onto the stage as a novice, with no experience, without much of an education, but with dreams and the will to make them happen. Brel's dream of the Wild West implied a great spirit of adventure. The symbolic image of the Wild West, an imaginary land that adults promise to children without warning them that it does not exist, was present throughout Brel's work. In one of his first songs, *Le Diable*, he was already describing the destruction of the imaginary land by adults: 'Les grands s'arrachent des dollars / Venus du pays des enfants'; in *Mon enfance* (1967) he remembers his childhood: 'Je devenais Indien / Pourtant déjà certain / Que mes oncles repus / M'avaient volé le Far West'. *Far West* was also the title of the second film that he directed in 1973. By giving up song recital to fulfil his dreams of adventure, Brel was therefore confirming his integrity and his image of a passionate individual. This was reflected in the titles of articles about the singer, written after his departure from Europe to go and settle down in the Marquesas Islands: 'Jacques Brel entre ciel et mer',⁷² 'Jacques Brel à bord de son voilier vole vers les Bahamas',⁷³ 'Vivre Libre',⁷⁴ 'Jacques Brel sur le Pacifique',⁷⁵ 'Jacques Brel, l'exilé volontaire'.⁷⁶

⁷⁰ INA, 'Entretiens avec Jacques Brel', France Culture, 23 July 1967.

⁷¹ Marc Robine, *Grand Jacques: Le roman de Jacques Brel* (Paris / Brézolles: Anne Carrière / Chorus, 1998), p.280.

⁷² *L'Equipe*, 25 March 1974.

⁷³ *L'Aurore*, 24 February 1975.

⁷⁴ *Le Figaro*, 28 June 1975.

⁷⁵ *L'Aurore*, 23 August 1975.

⁷⁶ *Le Figaro*, 3 June 1977.

The different themes that Brel exploited throughout his work – whether it was in songs, musicals, or films – all revolved around his dream: Brel dealt with different themes according to whether they fed his dream of a Wild West, such as childhood, departure or love, or whether they were an obstacle to it, such as death, love, and the bourgeoisie. Love was indeed for Brel both a strength, since it was an adventure, and a weakness, since it involved women. When he was young, he believed that a ‘grand amour’ could be a ‘grand voyage’ (*Quand on n’a que l’amour*, 1953). However, under the influence of his personal experiences, Brel significantly transformed the last line of the song; when he sang it at the Olympia in 1961, the words were: ‘Alors sans avoir rien / Que la force d’aimer / Nous aurons dans nos mains / Ami le monde entier’. In the original version of 1953 though, he did not sing *Ami*, but *Ma mie*; this is because as Brel matured, he decided that love was more beautiful when it took the shape of friendship or tenderness. Loving a woman was for Brel a subservience, a renouncement of adventure. Man, according to him, is a nomad, and loving a woman immobilises him, for women have a maternal instinct which incites them to settle with a man to ‘lay an egg’.

It is easy to see how the relentless pursuit of his dream also earned him the reputation of a misogynist. Brel’s conception of women was a recurrent theme in his interviews, and has remained a debated problem. The issue will be further developed in the following chapter, but what is interesting with regard to Brel’s public profile is that despite his misogyny being the subject of many articles and interviews, it did not tarnish his image. This might be due to the fact that what Brel reproached women for was also what he loved them for, and his analyses of them were more often a questioning of himself. In an interview published in *L’Express* in 1963, Brel was asked why he was a misogynist, and why women were liars and cheats: ‘Parce qu’elles mentent, parce

qu'elles trompent. Mais je ne suis pas misogyne. J'aime les femmes pour ce qu'elles sont, des menteuses, des trompeuses'.⁷⁷

Brel, therefore, fascinated the public and the media. He was admired both for his talent as a performer, and his determination as a human being. His will to live life to the full, even if it meant abandoning his wife and daughters, made him a figure of integrity and sincerity. Even in failure, he was admirable: he failed as a film director, but never regretted the experience. What was important for him was the attempt, or, as he sang in *La Quête* in 1968, 'atteindre l'inaccessible étoile'.

B – Brel, Brassens, Ferré, and their public

1) The public

There are no accurate ways of knowing the exact composition of the singers' public in the 1960s, since no official survey was ever conducted at the time. What follows, therefore, does not claim to be a definitive analysis of the audiences of Brel, Brassens, and Ferré; it simply aims at collecting available information – mainly from articles, critics, and unofficial surveys – in order to draw a picture, however imperfect, of the types of people who might have listened to the three singers in the 1960s. One of the ways in which to know who the public might have been is to examine what has been said about it by critics and journalists. Despite the fact that Ferré was seen as a slightly more intellectual figure than Brel and Brassens, critics and biographers of all three singers have commented on the heterogeneity of their audiences, with regard to age and

⁷⁷ Danièle Heymann, 'Jacques Brel', *L'Express*, 7 March 1963.

social class. Such comments do not represent reliable information, but they are interesting because they were read by the public, and therefore represent the view of part of the population; besides, the validity of these comments will be partly confirmed by the results of a survey used by Bourdieu in *La Distinction*, which will be examined later.

Charles Estienne, in his introduction to Ferré's work in the 'Poètes d'aujourd'hui' collection, mentioned the singer's reputation as a 'chanteur pour intellectuels et nuls autres', but immediately adding 'disait-on';⁷⁸ the imperfect suggests that at the time when Estienne was writing, in 1962, this reputation was starting to fade. According to Jacques Layani it eventually faded completely, since he observed in 1987: 'Léo Ferré est un rassembleur. On dira ce qu'on aimera dire, la réalité de son public est là, elle est concrète. [...] Vieilles dames et jeunes en cuir, soixante-huitards délavés et barbus, tout jeunes gens et intellectuels vieillissants'.⁷⁹

Brel was similarly described by one of his biographers as 'trionphant devant tous les publics'.⁸⁰ He was also the most internationally successful of the three; this might have been partly due to the fact that he was the one who performed abroad the most, but it was also because his songs, translated into English, were those that travelled best. According to *Chorus* magazine, Brel even received a 'Special Citation of Achievement' to reward the fact that the American adaptation of his song *Ne me quitte pas*, *If you go away* in English was broadcast over a million times in the United States.⁸¹ In 1967, Mort Shuman translated Brel's most famous songs and made a musical out of

⁷⁸ Charles Estienne, *Léo Ferré* (Paris: Seghers, 'poètes d'aujourd'hui', 1962), p.11.

⁷⁹ Jacques Layani, *La Mémoire et le temps* (Paris: Paroles et Musique, Seghers 1987), p.80.

⁸⁰ Jacques Vassal, *De l'Olympia aux Marquises* (Paris: Seghers, 'poètes d'aujourd'hui', vol.2, 1988), p.19.

⁸¹ *Chorus: les cahiers de la chanson n°25: Spécial Jacques Brel* (Brézolles: Les Éditions du Verbe, Autumn 1998), p.80.

them, *Jacques Brel is alive and well and living in Paris*, which was very successful in the Anglophone world, and is still performed today on a regular basis. Such international success testifies to the accessibility of Brel's work to a heterogeneous audience, but it can also be interpreted as a sign of its 'lesser' intellectual qualities, although, as Chris Tinker rightly observed, translations – or rather adaptations – were rarely faithful to the originals. Discussing *If you go away*, he wrote: 'As Sandra Lawrence comments, Brel's song is transformed [...] from "a nightmare of relinquishing one's last shred of self-respect" into "a song which most British people know as a sweet love song"'.⁸²

The singer whose popularity was seen, by critics and journalists, as appealing to the most heterogeneous audience was unquestionably Brassens. In an article in *L'Express* published in 1966, Danièle Heymann looked back at the last fifteen years of Brassens' career, observing that he had remained popular among young and older people alike.⁸³ Quoting a 1957 survey in a secondary school, a 1958 survey in a magazine, and a 1960 survey on *Europe n°1*, Heymann argued that 'à 20 ans comme à 50, à 20 ans plus qu'à 50, on se reconnaît dans Brassens'.⁸⁴ In 1970, critic Christian Hermelin described Brassens as 'une sorte de poète national, apprécié tout autant des intellectuels et du grand public';⁸⁵ a year earlier, *Paris Presse* had announced that Brassens was the singer whose songs were the most hummed by the public.⁸⁶ The feature of Brassens' popularity on which critics and journalists have most insisted is the fact that the singer was liked across social classes. Calvet, referring to a radio programme on which listeners could pose questions to Brassens, remarked on the

⁸² Chris Tinker, 'Jacques Brel is Alive and Well: Anglophone Adaptations of French Chanson' *French Cultural Studies*, v.16, 2, June 2005, p.182.

⁸³ Danièle Heymann, 'Brassens repart en guerre', *L'Express*, 12 September 1966, pp.38-41.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* pp.39-40.

⁸⁵ Christian Hermelin, *Ces chanteurs que l'on dit poètes* (Paris: L'École, 'Données actuelles', 1970), p.33.

⁸⁶ 'Brassens au finish', *Paris Presse*, 30 December 1969.

differences between his fans, calling them an ‘échantillon sociologique’.⁸⁷ Brassens was even liked by the people whose professions or beliefs he condemned: ‘Jusqu’au général Bigeard – tout un symbole, pourtant! – lui affirmant publiquement son admiration sur le plateau d’*Apostrophes*; comme si Brassens n’avait jamais été, de manière viscérale et jamais prose en défaut, un antimilitariste notoire’.⁸⁸ Jean-Claude Lamy observes that despite Brassens’ anticlerical reputation, he was ‘le chanteur préféré de 378 représentants de familles chrétiennes’.⁸⁹

Although the above observations do not constitute wholly reliable information, they are interesting when compared with the much more serious and reliable survey analysed in detail by Bourdieu in his sociological study of cultural practices, *La Distinction: critique sociale du jugement*.⁹⁰ In the description of his methodology, Bourdieu explains that his conclusions drew on the results of a survey from 1963, in which 692 persons were questioned, and which was complemented in 1967-68 by another survey that brought the number of subjects to 1217. He also specified that the surveys took place in Paris, Lille, and a small provincial town.⁹¹

Bourdieu explains that as far as the question on songs and singers was concerned, interviewees were asked to choose their three favourite singers from a list of twelve. Brassens, Brel and Ferré all appeared in the list, and came respectively first, second and third in middle class and upper class answers. Among popular classes, Brassens came second after Charles Aznavour, Brel came fourth and was preceded by Petula Clark, and Ferré came fifth. The higher the social class, therefore, the more the

⁸⁷ Louis-Jean Calvet, *Georges Brassens* (Paris: Lieu Commun, 1991), p.253.

⁸⁸ Marc Robine et Thierry. Séchan, *Georges Brassens: histoire d'une vie* (Paris: Fred Hidalgo/Fixot, 1991) p.167.

⁸⁹ Jean-Claude Lamy, *Brassens le mécréant de Dieu* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2004), p.175.

⁹⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, *La Distinction: critique sociale du jugement* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1979). The results of the survey are detailed in the ‘Annexe’, p.618.

⁹¹ Bourdieu, p.588.

singers' rankings increased. There were, however, differences between subcategories of the same social classes: among the popular classes, for example, Brassens obtained 40 votes from junior executives, Brel 48, and Ferré 20; but from primary school teachers, they respectively obtained 72, 55, and 30 votes. Similarly, among middle classes, the three singers ranked higher with secondary school teachers than with managers. This suggests that whatever the social class, the popularity of the three singers increases with the cultural capital of their audiences.

It seems, therefore, that although the three singers did touch a large audience, the claim by critics and the media that their popularity crossed social boundaries has to be put into perspective. It is true that in comparison with other singer-songwriters, their audiences were more heterogeneous, but one could argue that their popularity among people with a 'lesser' cultural capital – regardless of social or economic capital – was not as widespread as sometimes claimed. Topical examples of this were Ferré's father and Brassens' mother, who both disliked their sons' works. Ferré's father was the comfortably wealthy manager of the Monaco casino, unquestionably upper middle class; Brassens' mother was the wife of a mason, never in real financial difficulty, but a working-class woman. Both were very religious and believed in a strict and traditional upbringing of children, and both dismissed their sons' songs as vulgarity – even though Brassens' mother only disliked her son saying rude words in public, she was otherwise proud of his success. What both had in common, therefore, was a sense of morals and of values unsympathetic to socially liberal ideologies; and maybe they represent the best definition of the types of people who did not appreciate singers like Brassens, Ferré, or Brel.

This study of the singers' public suggests two more remarks that limit its scope, without limiting its relevance. The first one is that despite the accuracy of surveys, such

as Bourdieu's, and despite the willingness of those who study them, it remains very difficult to gain a clear understanding of the actual composition of a singer's audience. The second one is that despite the honesty and integrity of journalists and reporters, it seems that the media usually embrace the view of people with a 'higher' cultural capital. It is not the purpose of this thesis to examine the social orientation of the media when discussing cultural figures and phenomena; however, it might be worth mentioning that because Brel, Brassens, and Ferré were liked by representatives of virtually all *economic* classes, they were described by the media as transcending social classes; but such a label does not really take into account the fact that the singers were not necessarily approved of unanimously across *cultural* classes. Chapter Four will look at the theoretical or ideological levelling of social classes into a 'broad middle strata', or a 'national middle class', as a significant aspect of the reconstruction of French society in the post-war period;⁹² the question that this may raise – although it does not fall within the scope of this study to develop it – is whether the effort to democratise culture did not entail a similar standardisation of the *cultural* middle class, by declaring the norms and tastes of the cultural bourgeoisie to be the norms and taste of the nation.

2) The mediated audience

Another interesting aspect of the singers' audiences which has certainly influenced their public images and their legacies, is their *mediated* audience, that is to say the public at whom the media aimed Brel, Brassens, and Ferré. As has been discussed in Chapter Two, the locations in which artists performed used to have social connotations; and if, since the development of large concert halls and the decline of *café-concerts* and

⁹² Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: MIT Press, 1995), p.11.

cabarets, the social connotations of these locations have tended to fade, they have been partly transferred to the different media in which artists appear. The careers of Brel, Brassens, and Ferré started in cabarets in the 1950s, and then developed in concert halls like the Olympia or Bobino. Before analysing the types of newspapers and of audiovisual programmes in which they appeared, it is therefore worth examining briefly the locations of their debuts.

a – Performance locations

Despite the differences in the singers' public images, which have been defined earlier in this chapter, all three started in the same cabarets. Most of these cabarets, such as *Patachou*, *Le Caveau de la République*, *Le Lapin agile*, or *Les Trois Baudets*, were known for their anti-authoritarian spirit. Ferré's career having started earlier than Brel's and Brassens', he spent more time than them in *bohème* cabarets of the *Rive Gauche*, notably in *Le Bœuf sur le toit*. The three of them, however, although they were never really associated with the more bourgeois *Rive Droite* stages, did sing there, in cabarets like *Milord l'Arsouille* for example. From very early on in their careers, then, the three singers were associated with anti-authoritarian *bohème* locations, but they were not completely absent from the more bourgeois cabarets. Of course, as novice singers, they sang wherever they were accepted, so they might not have always chosen their stages; but it still means that from earlier on, they appealed to a variety of audiences.

Towards the end of the 1950s, Brel, Brassens, and Ferré moved to music hall stages, which had fewer social connotations. However, there were exceptions, such as the *Mutualité* – where Brassens and Ferré regularly performed – which was not exactly a music hall but which hosted meetings and concerts for a typically left-wing audience.

Brel, Brassens, and Ferré all supported left-wing causes, but for different reasons. Ferré, despite having clearly rejected any communist connection, claimed to have left-wing affinities, and often accepted invitations by trade unions and workers' associations to support their causes. Brassens left the anarchist paper *Le Libertaire*, but continued to support it by performing for them on a regular basis. Brel also took part in such support concerts, but without real political conviction; Alan Clayson, commenting on Brel's concerts in aid of the festival of *L'Humanité*, quoted Brel's own response: 'I do not take part in these sort of events because they're political or religious, but because I believe that I will find something in there which resembles generosity'.⁹³

The locations in which Brel, Brassens, and Ferré performed, although they cannot provide an accurate profile of the singers' audiences, still reveal some of their characteristics: left wing affinities but with no strong political commitment, or, bourgeois tendencies with a sympathy for the humanist ideologies traditionally associated with the left. In other words, a significant part of their audience – although not all of it – were arguably the ancestors of what the twenty-first century has called the *bobos*, the *bourgeois-bohèmes*.

b – The press

The types of newspapers that published reviews of the works of Brel, Brassens, and Ferré, also had an influence on the singers' celebrity, and contributed to defining their *mediated* audiences. In *La Distinction*, commenting on the reviews of the same play published in different newspapers, Bourdieu observed that specific plays were performed in specific theatres that had their own audience and were supported by

⁹³ Alan Clayson, *Jacques Brel: The Biography* (Chessington, Surrey: Castle Communications, 1996), p.23.

specific newspapers: the reviews ‘se distribuent depuis l’adhésion la plus inconditionnelle jusqu’au silence du mépris en passant par un point neutre (marqué par *Le Monde*)’; and ‘l’espace des journaux et, du même coup, l’espace des publics [...] s’organise lui-même selon des oppositions correspondant assez exactement à celles qui définissent l’espace des théâtres’.⁹⁴ According to Bourdieu, then, a positive or negative review in a specific newspaper is an indication of the type of audience that consume the cultural good in question, since, as he also argued, ‘un critique ne peut avoir d’influence sur ses lecteurs que pour autant qu’ils lui accordent ce pouvoir parce qu’ils sont structurellement accordés à lui dans leur vision du monde social, leurs goûts et tous leurs *habitus*’.⁹⁵

The songs of Brel, Brassens, and Ferré received very few negative reviews. Their critics were almost unanimously favourable to them, regardless of the political orientation of the newspapers for which they wrote. The three of them received positive reviews in neutral papers like *Le Monde*, in right-wing ones like *Le Figaro* or *L’Aurore*, and in left wing ones like *Libération* or *l’Humanité*. The few negative reviews, however, mostly appeared in the left wing paper *Combat*, and in the satirical *Le Canard enchaîné*. A critic in *Combat* criticised Brassens’ crude language: ‘La moindre incongruité qui s’échappait de Georges Brassens, oui, la moindre de ses flatulences déclenchait des tonnerres d’applaudissements’;⁹⁶ *Le Canard enchaîné*, as has already been quoted, reproached Ferré for being arrogant: ‘l’index véhément, le regard fulgurant, les projecteurs, tout l’arsenal, c’est trop pour ce qui n’est après tout qu’une chanson’.⁹⁷ Criticisms of both Brassens and Ferré also focused on their lack of complexity, which, according to the authors, suggested a lack of commitment to

⁹⁴ Bourdieu, p.261.

⁹⁵ Bourdieu, p.267.

⁹⁶ Maurice Ciantar, ‘Georges Brassens à l’Olympia’, *Combat*, 10 October 1955.

⁹⁷ ‘Léo Ferré à l’ABC’, *Le Canard Enchaîné*, 12 December 1962.

important causes, and therefore a lack of integrity. Such criticisms were more directed at Brassens and Ferré than at Brel, since, as has previously been discussed, the former's anarchist label meant that the public expected more from them than they were ready to take on. *Combat* declared that liking Brassens was 'facile',⁹⁸ while the Catholic newspaper *La Croix* talked about Ferré's ideas 'que d'aucuns applaudiront pour s'acheter facilement une bonne conscience'.⁹⁹

Criticisms were also published following specific events; for example, when Brassens's song *Les Deux oncles* – discussed earlier on in this chapter – was published, or when Brel was thought to have insulted the Flemish people in *Les Flamandes*. But overall, when the singers were criticised, it was usually for being too moderate. Negative reviews, however, were comparatively infrequent and mainly reinforced the idea that Brel, Brassens, and Ferré were liked and approved of by a moderate majority.

If reviews of the singers' works appeared in the '*spectacles*' columns of a variety of mainstream newspapers, the singers were also mentioned in more literary papers and magazines that usually addressed an audience more orientated towards 'high culture'. The three of them, for example, were discussed in *Les Lettres françaises*, between 1961 and 1967; a debate on whether or not Brassens could be considered as a poet was published in *Le Magazine littéraire* in July 1967;¹⁰⁰ performances by Brassens and Ferré were regularly reviewed, between 1957 and 1968, in *Les Nouvelles littéraires*. This suggests that the three singers were not only cultural symbols approved of by the mainstream press, but they were also legitimate subjects of discussion in the literary press; and as the following section on audiovisual media will illustrate, from the mid-

⁹⁸ M. Perez, 'Georges Brassens à l'Olympia', *Combat*, 10 December 1962.

⁹⁹ C. Boillon, 'Léo Ferré à Bobino', *La Croix*, 3 October 1967.

¹⁰⁰ J.P. Paury, 'Georges Brassens est-il un poète?', *Le Magazine littéraire*, July 1967.

1960s onwards, the three singers increasingly appeared on cultural and literary programmes.

c – Television and radio

An analysis of the database of the *Institut National de l'Audiovisuel* reveals that Brel, Brassens, and Ferré, were increasingly present on the radio and television from the end of the 1950s. Interestingly, however, although Bourdieu's survey suggested that the three singers' fans and fans of more 'popular' singers – like Petula Clark or Mireille Mathieu – represented two different categories of audiences, details of broadcasts reveal that it was far from uncommon for either Brel, Brassens, or Ferré, to participate in entertainment programmes in the same way as so-called popular singers. The three of them, for example, took part several times in the television programmes *Discorama* and *L'école des vedettes*, both variety programmes broadcast on Channel 1, which also invited guests such as Petula Clark, Charles Aznavour, Mireille Mathieu, or Johnny Hallyday. They sometimes even shared the limelight: in February 1962, Brassens and Hallyday appeared together at *L'Ecole des vedettes*,¹⁰¹ in April 1964 Brel happily engaged with the entertainment programme *La Grande farandole* alongside Jean-Marc Thibault, Pétula Clark, and Françoise Hardy,¹⁰² and in September 1966, Brassens and Brel were interviewed on television alongside Juliette Greco, Enrico Macias, and Johnny Hallyday.¹⁰³

It seems, therefore, that despite the willingness of journalists and critics not to assimilate *yéyé* or variety singers with representatives of *chanson*, audiovisual broadcasters did not abide by such distinctions. If they chose to schedule Hallyday,

¹⁰¹ INA, *L'Ecole des vedettes*, Channel 1, 12 February 1962.

¹⁰² INA, *La Grande farandole*, Channel 1, 11 April 1964.

¹⁰³ INA, *Tilt Magazine*, Channel 1, 9 September 1966.

Macias, and Brassens on the same set, it meant that they assumed there would be an audience for it, which suggests that if *chanson* singers appealed to a cultivated audience, they also appealed to a more popular variety-orientated one. In fact, Brel, Brassens, and Ferré appeared on a great variety of programmes; entertainment programmes have been mentioned, but they were also regularly the star guests of current affairs broadcasts, such as *Cinq colonnes à la une* and *Rendez-vous avec...*, on Channel 1, or *Radioscopie*, on France Culture. Brel, Brassens, and Ferré were personalities who were treated by the audiovisual media as any other personalities, regardless of the quality of their work or of the type of culture that they were supposed to represent. By treating them as celebrities, it can be said that the audiovisual media contributed to the popularisation of the three singers: they broadcast them as star singers on entertainment programmes, and star personalities in current affairs programmes, thereby making them accessible to, and imposing them as influential on, a significant part of the population.

If the media broadcast singers like Hallyday and Clark in entertainment – and sometimes current affairs – programmes, the same audiovisual media, in conjunction with the literary press, also played a part in the development of Brel, Brassens, and Ferré’s ‘literary’ reputations. Brassens and Ferré, because of the obvious connections between their work and poetry, were quite early on mentioned in, or invited to, literary programmes: in 1955, Ferré was mentioned on the radio programme ‘*Prenez garde à la poésie*’,¹⁰⁴ and Brassens on the television programme ‘*Lectures pour tous*’.¹⁰⁵ But from the early to mid-1960s, maybe as a result of becoming ‘poètes d’aujourd’hui’, such occurrences became more frequent, and they appeared in programmes such as *En français dans le texte*,¹⁰⁶ *La Vie des lettres*,¹⁰⁷ or, more frequently, *Bibliothèque de*

¹⁰⁴ INA, ‘Prenez garde à la poésie’, Chaîne nationale, 02 January 1955.

¹⁰⁵ INA, ‘Lectures pour tous’, Channel 1, 2 August 1955.

¹⁰⁶ INA, ‘En français dans le texte’, Channel 1, 16 June 1960.

¹⁰⁷ INA, ‘La vie des lettres’, Chaîne nationale, 10 October 1963.

poche.¹⁰⁸ Their names were also associated with specific poets or authors; Ferré was associated with the poets he set to music, notably Aragon, Baudelaire, Apollinaire, Rimbaud and Verlaine, Brassens with poets whose influence he claimed, notably Villon and Paul Fort, and Brel with the author of his hero Don Quixote, Cervantes – especially after his adaptation of the musical *L'Homme de la Mancha*. Ferré, for example, was involved in tributes to Aragon on France Culture;¹⁰⁹ Brassens was invited by the same radio station to pay tribute to Paul Fort,¹¹⁰ and Brel was asked to discuss Cervantes' *Don Quixote* on the first television channel.¹¹¹

The singers' mediated audience, then, was heterogeneous, but in an organised way. They appealed to a moderate majority interested in variety song and attracted by the humanist and anti-authoritarian echoes of their works. But because of some literary connections – intended or not – they also touched a more cultural elite that might not normally have been attracted by music-hall singers. One of the most interesting characteristics of their mediated audience though, is the way in which it arguably influenced, albeit only slightly, the singers' 'assumed' audience, that is to say the type of people who can be assumed to be their listeners.

3) The assumed listeners of the songs

The assumed listeners of the songs are by definition an unclear entity; they can be defined by the different clues given by the lyrics of the songs regarding the potential listener. These clues can help identify the types of people whom the singers can be

¹⁰⁸ INA, 'Bibliothèque de poche', Channel 1, 19 July 1967, 07 December 1967, 17 January 1968, 23 January 1969 (non-exhaustive list).

¹⁰⁹ INA 'Prélude de l'après-midi: hommage à Aragon', France Culture, 2 June 1966.

¹¹⁰ INA, 'Hommage à Paul Fort', France Culture, 5 January 1970.

¹¹¹ INA, 'Bibliothèque de poche', Channel 1, 17 January 1968.

thought implicitly to address or those who can empathise with what they say. A study of the assumed audience will therefore closely follow the previously discussed portraits of the singers through their songs, since the assumed listeners are necessarily influenced by those who address them. In the same way as the singers and the themes of their songs evolved with time, so did the assumed listener.

Some of the main characteristics of Ferré's assumed listeners are: to be erudite, to like poetry, and to be interested in anti-authoritarian ideologies such as anticlericalism and anarchism. From his earliest songs Ferré alludes to famous poets, such as La Fontaine and Baudelaire, whose work meant something to a majority of people, but he also illustrates some of his ideas quoting the names of Tzara, Genet, or Claudel, of whom the wider public might only know the names. The main themes of his songs are abstract concepts such as the place of man in society, the role of religion, the nature of art and poetry, or the effect of capitalism on human and artistic freedoms. So both his references and his themes require a certain background of cultural knowledge that might not be held by less educated people. Besides, the almost essayistic dimension of some of his songs does not always make for great entertainment, which restricts the audience to people for whom the intellectual experience offered by a song is as important as – or maybe even prevails over – the entertainment experience.

The theme of a nostalgic and idealised Paris is also present in Ferré's work; there are many references to the intellectual effervescence of the 1930s and 1940s, to the Latin Quarter, to the *bohème* spirit, and to the artistic activities of the *zazous*. Being sensitive to such themes suggests, on the listener's part, an attachment to the cultural tradition of the French capital, and a certain pride in its intellectual reputation. Such songs, therefore, can be easily thought to appeal to left wing intellectuals or, probably to

a greater extent, to people who are not intellectuals themselves, but who associate themselves with the tradition.

There is, however, another aspect to Ferré's assumed audience, which is closely linked to the socio-cultural context in which Ferré's work developed, and particularly linked to the events of May 68. An article published in January 1969 rightly observed: 'il y a eu les événements de mai. Une source inépuisable pour l'anarchiste né qu'il est. Léo Ferré jubile. L'été 1968 lui a donné raison. Ses prédictions étaient vraies: "La société est bien croulante, l'argent pourrait tout et la bourgeoisie est haïssable"'.¹¹² Ferré's work, despite the fact that it was not intended to be political, found an echo in the actors of May 68, and from then on, the singer's audience became younger and more heterogeneous. As was already discussed in Chapter Two, some of Ferré's songs, notably *Les Anarchistes* and *Ni Dieu ni Maître*, were appropriated by anarchists as slogans, regardless of the author's initial intention.¹¹³ Similarly, the eroticism of Ferré's songs appealed to a generation that advocated free love and the breaking of taboos. This means that although Ferré's work, because of its hermetic character, would normally be thought to have appealed to a cultivated elite, socio-political circumstances meant that he touched a much wider public.

Brassens' assumed audience, like his mediated one, is more heterogeneous than Ferré's. His references are from a wider range of the French cultural heritage, since they come not only from literary, historical, and political works and events, but also from popular and traditional songs, tales, and legends. Brassens' characters are usually simple people, manual workers or ordinary villagers, with whom a large variety of listeners can sympathise. Because of the libertarian echo of his songs, Brassens can be

¹¹² Norbert Lemaire, 'Léo Ferré, Léo la hargne, revient demain et pour un mois à Bobino', *L'Aurore*, 7 January 1969.

¹¹³ See p.80.

thought to appeal to a similar audience to Ferré's, but his anticlericalism and disregard for institutions being expressed in a less aggressive and more good-natured way, he does not shock people with firmer traditional moral values and therefore reaches more listeners.

In Brassens' songs, listeners are always assumed to be on the side of poor characters, who have simple values, and who are completely detached from the preoccupations of modern society. This can appeal to different types of listeners: it can touch people who actually identify with the characters, or those who simply sympathise with them; Brassens' characters, as they embody the rural and traditional world, can also be seen to symbolise the revolt against an increasingly capitalist and global world, which, in the 1960s, might have appealed to a generation of young people worried about the future of their society.

The references contained in Brassens' songs became, with time, increasingly erudite. Linda Hantrais, in her study of the singer's use of vocabulary, argued that Brassens' choice of words evolved to satisfy the needs of his audience; she observed that the concessions he made to his public 'expliquent son choix de noms propres avec des associations immédiates et l'absence relative d'archaïsmes, de termes littéraires, de nouveaux mots et de termes étrangers'.¹¹⁴ However, if he did use fewer archaisms and literary terms, it could be argued that the images associated with the proper nouns he used were not as immediate as Hantrais suggests. It is true, for example, that his allusions to Pénélope in the eponymous song (1960) might relatively easily be linked with the legend of Ulysses, and that many French people would have heard the names of Benjamin Franklin, Valéry, Prévert, Manon Lescaut, or Rastignac; but the reason Brassens used these names is not always obvious for listeners who do not have a

¹¹⁴ Linda Hantrais, *Le Vocabulaire de Georges Brassens* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1976, 2 vols), pp.210-211.

reasonably solid general knowledge. The reference to Benjamin Franklin in *L'orage* (1960), for example, makes no sense at all to anyone who does not know that he is the inventor of the lightning conductor; similarly, one cannot understand the comparison with Manon Lescaut in *Concurrence déloyale* (1966) without knowing that she was a prostitute. Some references are even less obvious; André Sallée explained that when Brassens sang, in *Le Bulletin de santé* (1966): 'Je suis hanté le rut le rut le rut', it was a direct allusion to Mallarmé's line: 'Je suis hanté: l'azur! l'azur! l'azur!';¹¹⁵ but to anyone who does not know the poem, this reference is far from obvious.

Brassens' assumed audience, then, is simultaneously simple, working class, traditional, anti-authoritarian, and cultivated. Although it might be difficult actually to find listeners who fit all these categories, the fact that Brassens addressed people as if they all did, probably played an important part in his almost unanimous popularity.

Brel's assumed audience is more straightforward to identify. His early songs, with their boy-scout echoes, can be thought to have appealed to right-thinking people. From the late 1950s onwards, however, Brel addressed an audience which he assumed passionate and opposed to the immobility of society. The adventurer Brel addressed his audience as if they were part of his adventures; he could therefore appeal to people disillusioned by the wars and aspiring to life where everything was possible. Since his work was not political, he might have appealed to people from any political background; his exhortations to freedom, love, and change were general enough to be interpreted by people as it suited them.

As in Brassens' case, the characters in Brel's songs are often simple people; but contrary to Brassens', Brel's are usually miserable and undeserving of the audience's

¹¹⁵ André Sallée, *Brassens* (Paris: Solar, 1991), p. 156.

sympathy. The characters involved and the scenes described are always familiar and recognisable, which means that the songs can appeal to most people. But since the audience does not usually sympathise with the characters, it sympathises with their performer instead, who seems to be suffering in every song as the emotions of mediocre characters are conveyed through him. Brel's performance adds an important theatrical dimension to the songs, which has earned the artist the reputation of being a dramatic and even poetic singer. There are few literary and poetic references in Brel's songs, but his linguistic creativity, that he put to the service of powerful portraits of society, testifies to a certain literary sense, which, combined with his dramatic skills, made his work appealing to an erudite as well as a popular audience.

C – Conclusion

1) Brel, Brassens, Ferré, and celebrity

One of the conclusions that can be drawn from the study of the singers' public profiles and of their audience is that their celebrity owes much to the systematic interaction between their work, their interpretation by the media, and their reception by the public. It is true that work, media, and audience are elements usually involved in the celebrity of any artist, not specifically Brel, Brassens, and Ferré, but it is noticeable that in their cases, the interaction is multilateral and very dynamic. Their work was interpreted by the media and the public, which reflected on the singers, and in turn influenced their work; this blurred the frontiers between the singers as men and as performers, thereby destabilising their position in the cultural sphere. As artists, their work and lives were of interest to the public, especially in a period when the cult of the 'star' was emerging; but

the public and the media also treated them as people whose opinions mattered beyond the world of *chanson*, since they were also required to talk about society and about the world in general, which is generally what intellectuals or politicians – not artists – are expected to do.

Artists are expected to play a part as they perform, but also to play the media's game; intellectuals or politicians on the other hand, are supposed to be sincere, to be themselves. Brel, Brassens, and Ferré, unlike *yéyé* singers who fully understood the functioning of the music industry and of the star system, did not understand where the border lay between their private lives, their media lives, and their work. As a result they were always simultaneously fully themselves, and fully their personae: they were not simply artists, they were men who had taken the proportions of artists, and who were therefore intimately linked to their work.

Brel, Brassens and Ferré have in common the fact that when they first decided to write songs, they never really intended to sing them themselves. They wanted to be songwriters, but not singers: they did not want to be public figures. Brassens' reluctance to perform his own songs was famous; in 1962, for example, he said on *Cinq colonnes à la une* that once he had written a song, he did not like to sing it over and over again.¹¹⁶ The very first person who sang Brassens' songs in public, Patachou, told him that no-one but him could sing songs like *Le Gorille* or *La Mauvaise Réputation*, and as Calvet observed: 'après l'abandon de Chevalier, des Frères Jacques, de Montand, Georges est dorénavant convaincu que, comme le lui répète depuis des mois Patachou, c'est lui qui devra être l'interprète de ses chansons. [...] Auteur et compositeur, il se résout lentement à être aussi interprète.'¹¹⁷ Ferré, at the very beginning, did not even want to

¹¹⁶ INA, *Georges Brassens, 10 ans de trac*, 'Cinq colonnes à la une', Channel 1, 7 December 1962.

¹¹⁷ Louis-Jean Calvet, *Georges Brassens* (Paris: Lieu Commun, 1991), p.110.

write his own lyrics, he was more interested in the music, but being constantly dissatisfied with other people's texts, he decided to write his own.¹¹⁸ Brel, mainly because of his physical appearance, was advised not to sing his own songs, but since nobody else was prepared to sing them, he carried on performing; Olivier Todd, in his biography of Brel, described the singer's doubts in 1953: 'Continuer à écrire des chansons? sûrement. Doit-il les interpreter ou les faire chanter à d'autres – qui n'en veulent pas?'¹¹⁹

Brel, Brassens and Ferré, as they struggled to find people to sing their songs, were eventually encouraged to do it themselves. As their songs became public, through performance and success, they became public as well, but more or less unwillingly. As a result, the three men developed an ambiguous relationship with their celebrity: the conflict between the public and the private, which characterises a singer's performance – and which has previously been discussed in Chapter Two – was exacerbated in the three singers' cases, since their audience had the men and the artists, as well as their personae, simultaneously in front of them. Of course, their reluctance to embrace celebrity only contributed to the process of celebrity, since, as Marshall explained quoting Edgar Morin, the celebrity is 'the exceptional with the ordinary',¹²⁰ which is precisely what the singers offered: they were ordinary men in the position of artists.

The fact that the singers illustrate the 'exceptional with the ordinary' is even more obvious in the way they behaved in interviews: they refused to talk about their private lives, arguing that they were not different from anybody else's. In an interview for *Le Monde* in 1974, Ferré explained that people should be interested in him as an artist, not as a man, and that once he has left the stage, he is an ordinary person: 'je vis

¹¹⁸ *Chorus: les cahiers de la chanson n°44: Spécial Léo Ferré* (Brézolles: Les Éditions du Verbe, Summer 2003), p.86.

¹¹⁹ Olivier Todd, *Jacques Brel: une vie* (Paris: Laffont, 1984), p.69.

¹²⁰ P. David Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p.15.

comme tout le monde, je suis un autre mec, avec ses emmerdes, ses faiblesses, avec la vie, les gens, ils ne veulent pas l'admettre. Ils ne le comprennent pas. Ma mère s'appelle Marie. Mon père s'appelle Joseph. La similitude s'arrête là'.¹²¹ In the 1969 interview, the three singers discussed the public's fascination with their private lives, and they all agreed that it was not only intrusive but also completely pointless. Ferré argued: 'En définitive, on vit comme tout le monde', to which Brassens added: 'Je crois que vous prenez la vie de n'importe qui, c'est la nôtre, quoi. Chacun a ses tics, ses manies, ses habitudes'.¹²² The singers similarly wondered why people were interested in what they thought about current affairs or politics, since, once again, their opinions were no more relevant than anyone else's; in an interview in 1977, Brassens thus explained why he very rarely talked publicly about current affairs: 'on m'interroge toujours sur le nucléaire, le tiers-monde... Bien sûr que ça me passionne, mais si je donne un avis en public, à un journaliste, on dit tout de suite: "Le Gros dit encore des conneries"'.¹²³

Their insistence on being ordinary people also meant that their interviews were not typical of celebrities' interviews. They did not believe that their private lives should be discussed with journalists, they were quite reluctant to talk about current affairs, and the themes of their interviews were consequently usually quite abstract questions about their work, literature, the status of the artist, love, women, and death. This has probably contributed to their reputation as intellectuals, since they were almost never heard talking about trivialities. It also meant that their interviews became another task accomplished by the artist, which might explain why many of them were, consciously or not, real performances. Brel's biographer, Olivier Todd, thus described the singer's interview skills:

¹²¹ *Le Monde*, 7 October 1974.

¹²² Cristiani and Leloir, p.59.

¹²³ J.F. Vergnies, 'Les rêveries provinciales de Brassens', *Le Matin*, 30 August 1977.

Avec des réponses travaillées et familières, gouailleuses et tragiques, brèves et imagées, Brel est un artiste de l'interview. Souvent, chanteurs, comédiens, peintres ne savent pas s'exprimer. Jacques, lui, n'est pas dupe. Il a sa place dans le système des médias et du show-business. [...] Beaucoup de ses interviews sonnent faux. [...] Jacques dit tout, n'importe quoi et le contraire. Pourquoi ? À la recherche de lui-même, il ne veut pas que les autres sachent qui il est au risque d'en savoir plus sur lui-même.¹²⁴

Interviews were not separate from their art; they were another dimension of it, and were as artificial – and probably as sincere – as their songs.

Brel, Brassens, and Ferré were constantly in conflict with their publicity, and this conflict became an integral part of their work and of their success. It is not impossible that they became aware and made use of it, but the fact is that their initial maladjustment to the new requirements of the music industry and star system fed their success. The interaction between the singers' personae, their audience, and the media, has already been discussed in the analysis of their public profiles, and, in the previous chapter, in the study of the complicity established between a singer and the audience. In Brel's song *Les bonbons 67* and Ferré's *Monsieur Barclay*, which have already been mentioned, the singers name themselves in the songs, and by doing so acknowledge and discuss their own celebrity: if Ferré can provide 'Monsieur Barclay' with a 'succès' (*Monsieur Barclay*), it is because he knows that he is famous; similarly, if Brel is 'à la télévision' (*Les Bonbons 67*), it is for the same reason.

It is interesting to note that the singers' acknowledgement of their celebrity when they were on stage – it was not always the case when they acknowledged it in interviews – was popular with the audience. In the recording of Brel's concert at the Olympia in 1961, the audience cheered when in the middle of the song *La Valse à mille temps*, he inserted a line referring to a parody of his song released by Jean Poiret earlier on in the year, *La Vache à mille francs*. Brel, at the Olympia, slightly transformed his

¹²⁴ Todd, p.183.

song to add: ‘Au troisième temps de la vache / Nous valsons elle est avec moi / Au troisième temps de la vache / Il y a du monde entre la vache et moi’, which made his audience laugh. The most successful integration of their public profiles into songs, though, unarguably goes to Brassens’ songs *Les Trompettes de la renommée* (1962) and *Le Bulletin de santé* (1966). In *Les Trompettes de la renommée*, Brassens expressed his irritation with journalists who, under the pretext that he was a public figure, claimed the right to know about his private life: ‘Manquant à la pudeur la plus élémentaire / Dois-je pour les besoins d’la cause publicitaire / Divulguer avec qui et dans quelles positions / Je plonge dans le stupre et la fornication’. In *Le Bulletin de santé*, Brassens replied to the rumour according to which his loss of weight was due to a cancer: ‘Si j’ai trahi les gros, les joufflus, les obèses / C’est que je baise que je baise que je baise/ [...] / Mais je n’ai pas encore / Non non non, trois fois non / Ce mal mystérieux dont on cache le nom’. These two songs are now among his most popular creations.

By integrating their media profiles into their art and their art into their interviews, the three singers dissociated themselves from the emerging star system; but by rejecting this system, they of course fitted into it even more. They tried to escape a system that, although they might not have known it at the time, they could not escape. This is why the period in which they flourished is crucial to their celebrity; the star system was still a new phenomenon in the 1950-60s, and whether they did understand its functioning or not is arguable, but what is certain is that the public and the media gave them the benefit of the doubt and attributed their behaviour to a sincere attempt to preserve their authenticity.

2) The media appeal of Brel, Brassens, and Ferré

David Marshall, in his study of celebrity and power, explained that ‘the celebrity element of the star is its transcendence of the text in whatever form’.¹²⁵ The conclusion of the previous chapter, also drawing on Marshall’s theory of the ‘star’, put forward the necessity of analysing the intertextuality of Brel, Brassens, and Ferré, in order to understand the significance of their systematic association.¹²⁶ The study of the singers’ public profiles, of their reception, and of the interaction that existed between their media profiles and their works, has demonstrated that the three of them did ‘transcend’ *chanson* and that, therefore, their social significance is not their significance as singers or as men, but their significance as ‘stars’.

Ferré was, as a star, a left-wing intellectual, a poet, an anarchist who rebelled against the corruption of society. He was someone who liked animals sometimes more than human beings, but who, behind his apparent misanthropy and misogyny, was a friendly man and a loving husband. He was a revolutionary, but he was also apolitical. He sometimes used offensive language, but mainly under the impulsion of sincerity. The star Brassens was a shaggy-looking, good-natured, working class individual. He was intelligent and cultivated, but without pretension, and always put his intelligence to the service of simple people and unpretentious forms of art. He had no interest in money or celebrity, and, represented, for many, the archetypal Gaul. The star Brel was a romantic, a passionate but irreverent individual. He was an adventurer who got on with his life, oblivious to what other people might say. He was intelligent, but less enthusiastic about culture than about new experiences. He was a generous and kind person who loved humanity and his friends more than his own family. He was someone

¹²⁵ P. David Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p.14.

¹²⁶ See pp.114, and Marshall, p.58.

who was manly enough to be able to tell other men he loved them, without provoking misunderstanding about his own sexuality.

There are common points between these three portraits of stars, notably a certain individualism and a strong sense of masculinity, which will both be discussed in the following chapter; there are also complementarities between the singers, for where one will be regarded as excessive, another one will be more moderate. But there are also contradictions and paradoxes which prevent their association representing a clear and uniform idea of *chanson* or of Frenchness. Brel, Brassens, and Ferré, then, do not simply represent Frenchness: they are three poles that provide a triangle within which Frenchness can be defined. Each singer embodies qualities that are thought to be traditionally French and with which the French people like to be associated. The association of Brel, Brassens, and Ferré is therefore the arbitrary sketch of a certain Frenchness. This triangle represented by the singers is a flexible way of defining French identity, since it provides space for paradoxes and contradictions. Within this triangle, as the following chapter will examine in further detail, being a revolutionary and being a pacifist are compatible.

This, of course, does not provide a satisfying justification for the *origins* of the systematic association of the three singers, but it provides a justification of its *significance*. One could argue that a similar ‘triangle’, with other singer-songwriters such as Barbara, Ferrat or Gainsbourg, for example, could equally well have represented French identity; but arguments against this assumption could now easily be brought forward, such as, for example, the fact that Barbara was a woman and was not influential enough in a very male-led society, or the fact that Ferrat was too obviously involved in politics, or that Gainsbourg’s provocativeness was too controversial for a

relatively conservative society. But the fact is that Brel, Brassens, and Ferré were three ideal candidates who were brought together by a journalist and a photographer on 6 January 1969, and who since then, thanks to this interview and the photographs of it, which have provided a tangible icon, have come to symbolise certain facets of Frenchness.

This chapter, then, has examined the ‘sign’ ‘Brel-Brassens-Ferré’ (to refer back to the Barthesian terminology), and has identified the fields that these three figures leave open for society to project and recognise in them its own identity. What the final chapter of this study will investigate is what ideals, values, and attitudes the French public has projected into these open fields, in order to define the image of French identity that has been crystallised with this artificial trio.

Chapter 4: The myth Brel-Brassens-Ferré and the post-war construction of French identity

This study has so far established that the myth Brel-Brassens-Ferré is a media construction which has provided French society with a tangible symbol upon which to project notions and ideals that it associates with its cultural identity. In particular, the previous chapter has identified, by examining the public profiles of the three singers, the notions through which the concept of 'Frenchness' has penetrated the trio; and it has concluded that the notions and ideals that were most perceived as contributing to the singers' Frenchness were authenticity (mainly conveyed through the simplicity and sincerity of the artist), poetry, romanticism, revolt and non-conformism, adventure, and to a certain degree, masculinity. The present chapter will now analyse how and why such notions and ideals found an echo in post-war French society, and argue that Brel, Brassens, Ferré, and their work, have absorbed and illustrated them much more deeply than their media profiles suggest.

This thesis has adopted several approaches to analyse the trio Brel-Brassens-Ferré. Firstly, it examined it from a sociological perspective, and, adopting Roland Barthes's theories of the 'myth', established that in order to understand fully the social significance of the three singers, the '*intentionality*' (to use Barthes' word) of the myth of the trio had to be taken into account; in other words the singers had to be analysed in relation to the public's interpretation of them and their work. Chapters Two and Three explored the ways in which the public exerted a control over the trio's image and signification; firstly, by analysing the implications of 'orality' and the space that oral genres leave for interpretation, and secondly, by drawing the singers' public profile and determining their media appeal.

This final chapter will now approach the trio from the outside: it will focus firstly on how the notions identified in Chapter Three fit in within the dominant cultural debates of post-war France, and how the three singers, in absorbing these notions and expressing them in their work, have been influenced by widespread debates related to similar ideals. Before concentrating on post-war cultural debates in general and on why the trio, because of the resonance of the ‘symbolic revolt’, is an ideal representation of these debates, an introductory section will analyse in detail how the notions of poetry, revolt, and authenticity are integrated in the singers’ work and how they function within the societal phenomenon that is the trio. This will help define more precisely what these notions really represent, and it will provide a more focused vision of where the trio’s ‘Frenchness’ actually lies. The second part of this chapter will then look at the artists’ work, focusing on the lyrics of the most popular and widespread songs as well as on the most typical characteristics of the singers’ personae, in order to demonstrate that in the light of a study of the trio as a societal phenomenon, the three singers and their work do epitomise a popular conception of Frenchness.

A – Post-war cultural debates and the trio Brel-Brassens-Ferré

1) The mechanism behind the trio’s ‘Frenchness’

If we analyse, in the light of the characteristics and implications of live performance identified in Chapter Two and of the singers’ public profiles examined in Chapter Three, the elements at stake in the popularity of Brel, Brassens, and Ferré, it is possible to observe a recurrent pattern in the successful functioning of their songs. As the previous chapters have established, the success of Brel, Brassens, and Ferré rests on a

particular relationship (mainly articulated by the media) between the singers, their personae, and the public – besides, obviously, the quality of the music and lyrics. What the present section is now going to argue is that for this relationship to be effective and result in the popularity of the singers, several conditions have to be met; and although the present study focuses on Brel, Brassens, and Ferré, these conditions are arguably the same for most *chanson* singers.

Firstly, the singer must project a persona that knows how to be a ‘bad guy’, it must be able to assume ridicule, be grumpy and somehow bitter. In Brassens’ work, this is characterised by narrators who are attracted to the common ‘sins’, and put their emotional instincts before social conventions. One line of the song *À l’ombre des maris* perfectly sums up the nonchalance of Brassens’ persona: ‘Ne jetez pas la pierre à la femme adultère je suis derrière’. The grumpy side of the character is illustrated by his reluctance to mix with society; another line, from *Le Pluriel*, once again clearly states: ‘Le pluriel ne vaut rien à l’homme et sitôt qu’on / Est plus de quatre on est une bande de cons’. In Brel’s work, the unpleasant side of the persona is characterised by bitter narrators frustrated by their lack of personal fulfilment, who have become stupid, cruel, or both. The best example of such a narrator can be found in *Les Bonbons*: ‘Oh oui Germaine est moins bien que vous / Oh oui Germaine elle est moins belle / C’est vrai qu’Germaine a des cheveux roux / C’est vrai qu’Germaine elle est cruelle’. In Ferré’s case, the grumpy and bitter side of the character is mainly illustrated by the frequent aggressiveness of the narrators and the crudity of the way in which they present reality, as, for example, in the song *La Solitude*: ‘Le désespoir est une forme supérieure de la critique. Pour le moment, nous l’appellerons “bonheur”, les mots que vous employez n’étant plus les mots, mais une sorte de conduit à travers lesquels les analphabètes se font bonne conscience’. Finally, in the three singers’ cases, another defining element of

the unpleasant side of their personae is their underlying misogyny, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

However the singers would not be popular if the audience did not know that, in other respects, they are actually ‘nice’ and capable of tenderness. To ensure that – and this is the second condition to be met for the singers to be popular – some of the songs must be sentimental and deeply human. Hence the importance, in the three singers’ work, of songs like *La Non-demande en mariage* or *L’Eau de la claire fontaine* for Brassens, *A toi* or *Avec le temps* for Ferré, and *Quand on n’a que l’amour* or *Ne me quitte pas* for Brel. Hence, also, the importance of the singers’ media profiles: it is necessary to their credibility that the media, which are supposed to reveal their ‘real’ human qualities, should present them positively as ‘nice guys’. It is also at this stage that the poetic and romantic qualities of the singers, identified in the previous chapter, play an important part: they contribute to picturing the singers as sensitive, loving, and human, which once again will reassure the public that they are not the ‘bad guys’ suggested by their personae.

The singers must also seem ‘maladjusted’: far from taking themselves seriously, they must be at odds with the traditional ‘star’. This, as has already been analysed in Chapters Two and Three, is achieved through the singers’ awkward physical appearance, and through the (relative) failure of their styles to adjust to the requirements of the music industry. This maladjustment – and regardless of whether it is feigned or real – will on the one hand enhance the dichotomy singer/persona mentioned above, and on the other hand, reinforce the singers’ authenticity. As has been stated in previous chapters, Brassens, for example, was uncomfortable on stage, he did not know how to react when the public applauded, and laughed at his own jokes; such shyness both convinced the public that he did not cheat, and made it impossible to associate the man

Brassens with his narrators, collectors of fiery love affairs. Such ‘maladjustment’, then, since it emphasises the necessary dissociation of the singer from his persona, often has humour as a corollary: a nice and respectable person impersonating a ridiculous and unpleasant one, often results in a comic situation. This can arguably explain why humour is such a characteristic of French *chanson*: regardless of his or her actual qualities, the *chanson* singer embodies simultaneously (through the dichotomy singer/persona) a ‘bad guy’ and a ‘good guy’, and the contrast, made obvious by the maladjustment, creates a comic effect. This can also explain why controversial singers are often characterised by the lack of a precise dichotomy singer/persona, and consequently a lack of humour in their works (or a lack of humour resulting in an unclear dichotomy singer/persona). The analysis of Ferré’s public profile in Chapter Three, for example, has revealed that his public often struggled to dissociate him from his persona; and Ferré is by far the most controversial and least comic singer of the trio.

Finally, the last condition which has to be met by the singers to make the interaction singer-persona-public a successful one, and which actually contributes to their ‘maladjustment’, is that they must sing about or describe familiar scenes. Staging the familiar will magnify it and make it more comic, while at the same time emphasising the singers’ normality – maybe even their mediocrity – when they are supposedly in the positions of being ‘stars’ (who are inherently extraordinary people). Hence the importance of everyday and banal themes in their comical songs: the faults and ridicule of the narrators can be exaggerated, but they must never be extraordinary, for the narrator must always be able *potentially* to resemble the singer or the audience; this is because in order to appreciate fully the dichotomy singer/persona, the audience must sympathise with them both. The familiar, however, is represented very differently in the three singers’ work. Brel, as has already been discussed, mainly describes

everyday scenes and stereotypical characters. Brassens is more subtly familiar; if he makes few references to the everyday, his stories are anchored in a cultural background familiar to French people. As for Ferré, his songs regularly mention current social and political issues made familiar by the media and the social-economical context.

The four conditions necessary to the singers' success, identified above, illustrate how the three notions mentioned in the introduction to this chapter (revolt, poetry, and authenticity) are articulated in the trio's work. 'Pretending to be a "bad guy"', 'actually being a kind person', 'being maladjusted', and 'telling familiar or banal stories' all revolve around the themes of 'revolt', 'poetry', 'authenticity'. Indeed, the 'bad guy' is usually a non-conformist in his obstinate determination to ostracise himself from society; being a likeable person, as has been observed, is associated with being a romantic, and the singers' songs that have been considered the most poetic were mostly romantic, sentimental ones; the singers' maladjustment, as has been argued, is an effective way to enhance their authenticity. Telling banal stories also contributes, to a certain extent, to the trio's authenticity, but it is also an essential means of communication and connection between the singers and the public. The first section of this chapter, then, has shown the ways in which 'revolt', 'poetry', and 'authenticity' contribute to the mechanism of the singers' popularity; what this section will now argue is that they also contribute to the mechanism behind the trio's 'Frenchness'.

Despite the fact that they proceed differently, Brel, Brassens, and Ferré have in common that they tell familiar stories that express feelings that have nothing extraordinary to them, but that are real, human, and recognisable. Through their work and their celebrity, then, the three singers praise and emphasise the poetic dimension of the ordinary, the popular, and the banal; they provide the public with the opportunity to

realise that the lives of ordinary people can be of artistic interest. It could even be argued that this fascination of the ordinary for the ordinary is not only characteristic of post-war *chanson*, but is also typical of a deeper rooted French attitude, characterised by a paradoxical aspiration to an apparent mediocrity.

In March 2002, the magazine *Télérama* asked a psychoanalyst, Pierre Babin, to comment on the success of the film *Le Goût des autres*, by directors Agnès Jaoui and Jean-Pierre Bacri. Although neither *Télérama* nor Pierre Babin can be considered as experts in the analysis of national identity, the article is interesting for our purpose here since it offers an interpretation of a phenomenon similar to the one at stake in the popularity of the trio Brel-Brassens-Ferré: an attraction to mediocrity. In the article, Babin alludes to the ‘*très française*’ tradition of the ‘*beauf*’:¹

Le film [*Le goût des autres*] s’apparente à quelque chose que les Français aiment beaucoup parce qu’ils s’y reconnaissent: l’éloge du beauf. Ou plutôt ‘des’ beaufs, puisque même les intellectuels en sont, empêtrés eux aussi dans leurs idées reçues. Nous sommes tous des beaufs, a fortiori dans les choses privées. Le succès, en leur temps, des *Bronzés* et du *Père Noël est une ordure* reposait sur cette même vérité. Qui que vous soyez, quels que soient vos goûts, votre formation universitaire, vos lectures, vous ne pouvez échapper à la bêtise générique de l’être humain, toujours assujetti à ses préjugés, manquant de légèreté, d’invention, de capacité à étonner son monde et à s’étonner lui-même.²

It is true that the *beauf* as described in this article is present in many French films and in contemporary *chanson*, as testified today by the popularity of singers like Bénabar or Vincent Delerm. It could also be argued that the humour of the works of Brel and Brassens mainly, and Ferré to a certain extent, can be related to the *beauf* mentioned in the *Télérama* article; their humour indeed testifies to an attraction of the audience to a mediocrity in relation to which they feel slightly superior, a mediocrity that resembles

¹ The dictionary Robert & Collins Super Senior (Paris: Robert & Collins, 2000) gives the following definition of *beauf*: ‘narrow-minded Frenchman with conservative attitudes and tastes’; ‘It is a pejorative and humorous term used to refer to stereotypical ordinary Frenchmen who are perceived as being somewhat vulgar, narrow-minded and chauvinistic’.

² *Télérama*, Mars 2002.

them, but with which they do not identify, a mediocrity that could be the ancestor of the contemporary *beauf*.

The significance of the *beauf* as described in the article might make more sense when considered within the perspective of the evolution of what is conventionally called '*l'esprit gaulois*'. The 'Gaul spirit' is a myth widely present and much asserted in France; Georges Minois, in *Histoire du rire et de la dérision*, gives a very effective definition of it, inspired by the work of medievalist Joseph Bédier:

Cet esprit gaulois idéal, tel qu'il existe dans l'imaginaire français, a été fort bien décrit par Joseph Bédier: 'Sans arrière-plan, sans profondeur; il manque de métaphysique; il ne s'embarrasse guère de poésie ni de couleur; il n'est ni l'esprit de finesse, ni l'atticisme. Il est la malice, le bon sens joyeux, l'ironie un peu grosse, précise pourtant, et juste. Il ne cherche pas les éléments du comique dans la fantastique exagération des choses, dans le grotesque, mais dans la vision railleuse, légèrement outrée, du réel. Il ne va pas sans vulgarités; il est terre-à-terre et sans portée; Bérenger en est l'éminent représentant. Satirique? Non, mais frondeur, égrillard et voluptueux, friand et non gourmand. Il est à la limite inférieure de nos qualités nationales, à la limite supérieure de nos défauts'.³

The trio's 'maladjustment', mentioned earlier, can arguably be related to the 'esprit gaulois' described here. The paradox of an audience that sympathises both with the 'nice singer' and with his mediocre double is not too distant from the paradox of a people that claims the legacy of a civilisation without sophistication, mischievous, but clever and good natured.

According to Eugen Weber, until the 19th century the debate over who, between the Gaul and the Franks, were the true ancestors of the French, 'almost became a class struggle': 'Gaulois was associated with rough and rebel, and the nobles thought they descended from the more sophisticated Franks'.⁴ The Gauls were 'established' as the 'true' ancestors of the French under the Third Republic: this 'for the good reason that, by the 1880s, children were taught not conflict but reconciliation. If there had been

³ Georges Minois, *Histoire du rire et de la dérision* (Paris Fayard, 2000), p.451.

⁴ Eugen Weber, *My France: Politics, Culture, Myth* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1991), p.29.

conquest [...] there was above all assimilation and integration.’⁵ It does not fall within the scope of the present study to analyse in detail the foundations and connotations of the popularity of the myth ‘*nos ancêtres les Gaulois*’, but from Weber’s book, it seems that establishing the Gaul as the true ancestors of the French became a symbol of the recognition of the value of the ‘popular’, less sophisticated, more ‘authentic’ part of society. Within this perspective, the efforts of Brel, Brassens, and Ferré to present themselves as not socially exceptional, and maladjusted to the ‘star’ milieu, can be interpreted as a legacy of the ‘*esprit gaulois*’: their attitude – and that of the media – testifies to a recognition of the superiority – or the greatness – of common, maybe even mediocre, people.

It could therefore be argued that the dichotomy singer/persona mentioned above is, in a way, an essential element of the trio’s *Frenchness*: the dichotomy singer/persona within the same character symbolises the assimilation of the intelligent, talented, kind artist with the mediocre ordinary individual. It represents, in other words, the synthesis of what one would like to be and what one is. Pinet, in his article about Brassens, Astérix and Cabu, observes that Brassens ‘glorifies the individual, but does not confront him with the risks or imperatives of existential choice or compromising political commitment’; he then adds that ‘the right not to choose was perhaps the single most important value for Frenchmen in the postwar period when many were insisting that one had to take sides’.⁶ The right not to choose is an issue which is at the heart of the question of identity in France: reconciling a rebellious past and legacy – and no matter whether this legacy is mythical or not – with ambitions of preservation; not choosing between being the ‘pauvre type qui vi[t] de [sa] plume / Ou qui ne vi[t] pas c’est selon

⁵ Weber, p.31.

⁶ Pinet, ‘Astérix, Brassens, and Cabu’, p.283.

la saison’,⁷ or being the one who ‘envoie des idées dans la rue et [s]e fait de l’argent avec elles’;⁸ not choosing between being a bourgeois or an anti-bourgeois.

The trio Brel-Brassens-Ferré, therefore, through their celebrity and their work, illustrates everyone’s mediocrity and presents it as a talent. Through the duality of their characters, they provide a solution to the very paradoxical desire of many individuals which is to change the world, be an extraordinary person, while at the same time remaining ordinary and not disturbing their own lives. The popularity of the singers rests on a series of paradoxes which suggest, for example, that being great is not dissociable from being mediocre, that revolt goes with status quo, or that being a masculine man requires having a romantic, more feminine side. What the above analysis has demonstrated, then, is that discussions and comments of the trio’s Frenchness, in the media, has greatly underestimated the extent to which Brel, Brassens, and Ferré have actually embodied Frenchness, for what their popularity and success also betray is a profound crisis of cultural identity. In order to better define how the trio illustrates this identity crisis, the following section will first examine the post-war cultural debates that have nurtured it. All the paradoxes mentioned above contribute to a more general definition of Frenchness, particularly in the post-war context; what follows, then, will focus on the notion of ‘Frenchness’ and define more precisely these paradoxes.

⁷ Léo Ferré, *Les poètes*.

⁸ Léo Ferré, *Il n’y a plus rien*.

2) Frenchness in the post-war context

a – A definition of Frenchness

The introductory chapter of this thesis, drawing on Barthes' theories in *Mythologies*, argued that the concept of Frenchness could not be precisely defined, since it was not an essence, but an imaginary notion that designated the unlimited number of representations of itself. Richard Kuisel, in his study of Americanisation in France, similarly observed: 'France is an invention, a conceptualisation. Like other nations, it is to a large extent a collective subjective perception'.⁹ Despite the subjectivity of the notion of Frenchness and, therefore, the impossibility of defining an essential France, Herman Lebovics, in his study on '*True France*', explains that throughout the first half of the twentieth century, politicians and intellectuals tried to grasp the essence of 'True France' and aspired to restore its values in French society; but Lebovics also concludes 'that the construction of an exclusive, unitary, and fundamentalist concept of French cultural identity was a conservative political project that took in good people and that, for the democracy of the Third Republic, it was a disastrous one'.¹⁰ However, despite the counter-productiveness of trying to define the essence of True France or Frenchness, the evolution of what different segments of society have perceived this essence to be, which Lebovics analyses in his book, provides a valuable insight into the cultural debates over French identity during the first half of the twentieth century.

Lebovics argues that what destabilised France's identity was the advent of the modern era: having to move from one cultural state to another profoundly confused the

⁹ Richard Kuisel, *Seducing the French: the Dilemma of Americanization* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1996, 1st edition: 1993), p.6.

¹⁰ Herman Lebovics, *True France: The Wars over Cultural Identity 1900-1945* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992), p.189.

country's identity. He explains that 'cultural liminality is the phenomenon of crossing a cultural threshold; those who cross over suffer a deep sense of the danger, the loss, and if successful, the accomplishment of moving from one state of being to a new one.'¹¹ He also observes, focusing more specifically on the case of France at the dawn of the modern era:

The tension between these two impulses – to move with the tide of the present and to hold to an inherited course – gives new state nationalism its peculiar air of being at once hell-bent toward modernity and morally outraged by its manifestations. There is a certain irrationality in this. But it is more than collective derangement; it is a social cataclysm in the process of happening. (7)

The scope of Lebovics's study being 1900 to 1945, he describes a phenomenon characteristic of the Third Republic; however, the double impulse, that he mentions, to 'move with the tide' and to 'hold to an inherited course', bears similarities with the series of paradoxes mentioned in the previous section about the post-war period, particularly with the aspiration to both revolt and the status quo. This suggests that these conflicting 'impulses' of French cultural identity, triggered by the transition into the modern era, stretched into the twentieth century and became a constituent dynamic of the Third Republic and thereafter, of republican ideology.

Jean-Pierre Rioux and Jean-François Sirinelli, in *Histoire culturelle de la France*, analyse the issues and debates around French cultural identity in the twentieth century, and identify a similar duality of impulses in inter-war France, which they argue became an essential part of Republican identity. They insist on the fact that the trauma of the First World War encouraged the blooming of pacifism, and that this pacifism expressed itself in different and sometimes contradictory ways among people of different generations and backgrounds. They explain that on the one hand 'la génération du feu' preserved the memory of the great massacre that was World War One, and that

¹¹ Lebovics, p.7.

‘cette sociabilité commémorative et sous-tendue par une sorte de piété laïque nourrit donc un pacifisme affectif et qui fait masse’;¹² on the other hand, ‘le choc du premier conflit mondial se retrouve aussi, par rebond, dans un pacifisme des intellectuels, sécrété par une mauvaise conscience profondément intériorisée’ (144). The interwar pacifism, as Rioux and Sirinelli argue, ‘est à la fois une sensibilité de consensus, touchant le plus grand nombre, et un engagement aux extrêmes. Chez nombre de jeunes intellectuels, en effet, il se teinte de révolte contre l’ordre établi’ (144). What Rioux and Sirinelli underline here is that the pacifist ideologies that spread after the first world conflict were animated both by a sentiment of return to order and by a sentiment of revolt. They also observe that these conflicting tendencies, instead of fragmenting the identity of the Republic, contributed to consolidating it:

Cette culture républicaine, désormais profondément intériorisée, est devenue une culture identitaire. Et probablement, à tout prendre, c’est précisément parce qu’elle est conflictuelle – et, de ce fait, que chaque partie en présence s’estime dépositaire de la République – qu’elle est ainsi identitaire. Autre paradoxe, donc, qui ne l’est qu’en apparence: une culture de conflit peut être en même temps un ciment. (145)

What Rioux and Sirinelli’s analysis of inter-war pacifism suggests is that the Third Republic established a culture of conflict as an essential principle of France’s modern identity; this culture of conflict was kept alive by several factors after 1945, such as the Americanisation of the country and the national insecurities caused by World War Two and the decolonisation wars, and established itself as an integral part of republican identity. The previous section of this chapter, discussing Christopher Pinet’s study of Astérix, Brassens, and Cabu, argued that ‘the right not to choose’ was at the heart of the French identity issue; this is consistent with Rioux and Sirinelli’s assumption of a ‘culture de conflit’ in France and implies that although the wider public tends to adopt a rather conservative and passive approach to its national identity, the non-conformist –

¹² Jean-Pierre Rioux and Jean-François Sirinelli, *Histoire culturelle de la France*, vol.4: *Le Temps des masses: le vingtième siècle* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1998), p.144.

sometimes revolutionary – ideologies and attitudes of intellectuals are still an integral part of this identity.

There seems to be, within the ideologies that nurture the debates on cultural identity, a perpetual tension between revolt – or breaking away from the past in order to move forward – and the status quo – or reasserting traditional values in the hope of stabilising the country by strengthening its identity; in fact the paradox revolt/status quo can be used as a paradigm for the study of several key issues relating to French cultural identity, such as the attitude towards modernisation and Americanisation, or the ideologies motivating cultural policies; both these issues will be examined in detail and in relation to the trio Brel-Brassens-Ferré below. In *Seducing the French*, Richard Kuisel defines the main challenge with which France was confronted at the dawn of globalisation:

The issue for the French was to find the way to possess American prosperity and economic power and yet to avoid what appeared to be the accompanying social and cultural costs. The challenge was to become economically and socially ‘modern’ without such American sins as social conformity, economic savagery, and cultural sterility.¹³

In other words, the country was animated by a desire to both break away from its traditional way of life, and to root its cultural traditions in the present. In *True France*, Lebovics identifies a similar duality in relation to the definition of French identity: he explains that the debates over ‘True France’ were mainly animated by the conflict between cultural innovation and the promotion of ‘authentic’, traditional culture. Cultural innovation could not be stopped, but the question was whether it should be sanctioned by policies and recognised as contributing to French identity:

The only currency these people could acquire to pay for their full participation in the life of the nation was education. If they could immerse themselves and their children in the culture of France – the language, the arts, the things-that-go-without-saying – they would *be* fully French. [...] How could immigrants be

¹³ Kuisel, p.3.

assimilated in a moving, confusing, avant-garde cultural scene? Better – more authentically French – to read the Molière and Racine assigned in the republican schools.¹⁴

One of the issues on which most people and political parties agreed, then, was the importance of ‘authentic’ culture in the consolidation of French identity, whether in the form of the study of French classics or of the promotion of regional and rural folklore culture. Indeed, as Lebovics also observed, in inter-war France, ‘folklore was a major battleground of what Henry Rousso has termed the great “Franco-French civil war” over what was the authentic France (136)’. Frenchness, then, had to be reminiscent of an authentic past and glorious traditions, and also had to be modern but without being Americanised.

In Kuisel’s words ‘what has defined, and continues to define, Frenchness is complex, changing, subtle, contested, and arbitrary rather than simple, distinct, consensual, and given. It is not a matter of geographical space, history, language, the state, or even culture, though all of these contribute’.¹⁵ What the present section has revealed, however, is that despite the arbitrariness of any definition of Frenchness, the first half of the twentieth century saw France enter a new modern era, throughout which its international prominence declined, and established the perpetual tension between revolt and status quo – or modernisation, and traditionalism and folklore – as a fundamental dynamic of the country’s cultural identity. The political, economical, and social circumstances evolved throughout the twentieth century, but the post-1945 cultural debates were still founded on the same dynamics.

As was mentioned in Chapter One of this thesis, Barthes, in *Mythologies*, insists on the fact that a myth is necessarily historical; consequently, in order to understand

¹⁴ Lebovics, p.158.

¹⁵ Kuisel, pp.4-5.

precisely what the significance is of the mythicisation of the trio Brel-Brassens-Ferré, it is essential to take into consideration the state of society and the debates over its national identity at the time when the three singers became an emblematic trio. The following section, then, will focus on the socio-political circumstances of the post-1945 period, and the ways in which they influenced the cultural debates of the time that are relevant to the analysis of the trio.

b – Post-war debates and French identity

One of the most important and obvious characteristics of the period is that it is a post-war period. As was already mentioned in Chapter One, war, whether in reality or in art, is a phenomenon that cultivates paradoxical ways of thinking, since it animates human beings with conflicting sentiments, such as bravery, fear, fraternity, or brutality; and the two world wars, because of their scale, carried these paradoxes to the extreme. The post-war period, then, was particularly favourable to the exacerbation of the tensions between revolt and status quo discussed in the previous section. Even the end of the wars brought about paradoxical reactions, for after having witnessed so much violence and cruelty, human beings logically aspired to order, peace, and respect for human life. However, defending respect for human life also implied revolting against the authorities that allowed such a massacre and against those which continued to oppress people, whether in France or abroad. The two world wars provoked contradictory feelings in society: people aspired to order while at the same time wanting to revolt. Such contradictory feelings were also reflected in artistic and cultural avant-garde movements of the first half of the twentieth century, which, as was observed in Chapter One, had a

significant influence on post-war *chanson*. These avant-garde movements, Danièle Zeraffa-Dray explains,

traduisent une crise profonde des valeurs et une remise en cause, progressivement radicale, de la tradition: le cubisme et le dadaïsme témoignent de cette évolution. Dans la première moitié de l'entre-deux-guerres, le surréalisme milite pour une révolution totale (changer l'homme, changer la vie). Néanmoins, les années 1930 voient aussi se renforcer les valeurs de la tradition et du conformisme dans une idéologie du retour à l'ordre.¹⁶

The contradictions and paradoxes that nurtured post-war thought also manifested themselves in the ideological conflicts that existed between the different cultural movements. Responding to the Dadaist insistence on art for art's sake, an alternative theory argued for politically committed art (as with Sartre or Aragon for example), to which responded in its turn the structuralism of the *nouveau roman*. What characterised the intellectual field after each of the wars was therefore the juxtaposition of paradoxes, private/public, love/hatred, order/disorder, revolt/despair, commitment/disenchantment. Such a juxtaposition of paradoxes, far from compromising the cultural coherence of the period, contributed to giving it a constructive dialectical dynamic, since, as Rioux and Sirinelli observes, and as was quoted earlier, 'une culture de conflit peut être en même temps un ciment'.¹⁷ Post-war society, then, was on social, artistic, and intellectual levels very much animated by the revolt/status quo tension discussed above. Chapter One mentioned that Brel, Brassens, and Ferré were influenced by artistic and intellectual movements of the post-war period, and indeed, their work testifies to such influences, particularly through the determined individualism and pacifism that it advocates; but their work also illustrates social debates that concerned the general public independently of intellectual ideologies.

¹⁶ Danièle Zeraffa-Dray, *D'une République à l'autre* (Paris: Hachette Supérieur Collection Carré Histoire, 1992) p.235.

¹⁷ Rioux and Sirinelli, p.145.

It is not the purpose of this study to provide an in-depth analysis of post-war society, but scholars who have studied the period have observed that paradoxes and contradictions were at the heart of the reconstruction of French culture and mentality; and from these various studies it seems that these paradoxes were all, to some extent, founded on denials – whether social, economical, or historical – or at least on conscious but untold compromises, usually made at the expense of a minority or of a supposedly national ideal. Kristin Ross, for example, in her study of the reordering of French culture, has argued that the contradictions of the post-war mentality could only be explained with respect to the ambivalent power-relations which existed between France, and its ex-colonies on the one hand, and the United States of America on the other hand:

The peculiar contradictions of France in that period can be seized only if they are seen as those of an exploiter/exploited country, dominator/dominated, exploiting colonial populations at the same time that it is dominated by, or more precisely, entering more and more into collaboration or fusion with, American capitalism.¹⁸

She argues that in the aftermath of the Second World War, modernisation and decolonisation defined a new social reality that greatly influenced people's behaviour and their attitudes toward life. In a society with a wounded past, for example, modernisation was readily embraced, since 'the arrival of the new consumer durables into French life – the repetitive, daily practices and new mediations they brought into being – helped create a break with the eventfulness of the past' (p.10), which represented 'a perfect reconciliation of past and future in an endless present' (p.11). The modern insistence on the everyday, then, helped post-war society not to dwell on the failures of the past but to focus instead on rebuilding itself.

One of the requirements of modernisation, Ross continues, was the levelling of social classes, and the creation of a 'broad middle strata: a "national middle class"' (p.11), in which 'national subjectivity begins to take the place of class' (p.12). In other

¹⁸ Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: MIT Press, 1995), p.7.

words, modernisation implied the denial of class conflict: 'Class conflict, after all, implies some degree of negotiability; once modernisation has run its course, then one is, quite simply, either French or not, modern or not: exclusion becomes racial or national in nature' (p.12). Michael Kelly identifies a similar issue: arguing that workers and intellectuals traditionally expressed their 'sectional interests' in terms of class-consciousness for the former and in 'a sense of professional autonomy' for the latter, he observes:

Both gave way, at least temporarily, to a sense of their duty to serve, or represent, the nation. Neither was easily achieved, or painless, but the willingness of both groups to subordinate themselves to the greater national good was a defining characteristic of the reinvented post-war France.¹⁹

Such subordination to the national interest not only impacted on class relations, but also on gender relations. Despite the significant role played by women during the war and the Occupation, very few, as Kelly pointed out, were remembered:

A small number of those who survived, like Edith Thomas or Lucie Aubrac, gained some prominence after the war. But most preferred to slip back into the anonymity of private life. They were encouraged in this by the pattern of official recognition, which largely forgot the contribution of women. (p.114)

The same withdrawal of women into private life has been identified by Ross, and she interprets it as the result of the simultaneous decline of the French colonial empire and spread of modernisation:

the colonies are in some sense 'replaced', and the effort that once went into maintaining and disciplining a colonial people and situation becomes instead concentrated on a particular 'level' of metropolitan existence: everyday life. [...] And women, of course, as the primary victims and arbiters of social reproduction, as the subjects of everydayness and as those most subjected to it, as the class of people most responsible for the complex movement whereby the social existence of human beings is produced and reproduced, *are* the everyday: its managers, its embodiment.²⁰

¹⁹ Michael Kelly, *The Cultural and Intellectual Rebuilding of France after the Second World War* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) p.84.

²⁰ Ross, p.77.

These social concessions at the expense of history, working classes, and women, were motivated by a general will to overcome the weaknesses of post-war France. However, when weaknesses could not be overcome, they had at least to be compensated for; one of the country's most painful wounds was the loss of an important part of its international political influence; but as Kelly argues, the country's political deficiencies were compensated for by its cultural and intellectual prosperity:

In this sense, the particular circumstances of the post-war years enabled the French intellectual elites to play a leading role in restoring their country's international reputation, and ensuring that the identity of France on the world stage was closely entwined with its intellectual culture.²¹

The place of artists and intellectuals in society and the importance given to culture by post-war policies, are another characteristic of the period, which obviously had an effect on the popularity of the trio Brel-Brassens-Ferré, since representatives of French culture were seen as real national goods that contributed to help the country maintain a glorious image.

The list of characteristics of post-war French society identified above is far from exhaustive; but these characteristics are essential ones in the context of the rebuilding of the country's mentality, and ones that are particularly relevant to an understanding of the extent to which the trio Brel-Brassens-Ferré actually reveals an aspect of Frenchness. Indeed, the trio embodies simultaneously the aesthetic dimension of the crisis of values of the period, and the profound paradoxes of the post-war mentality. The conclusion of the previous chapter argued that the three singers represent a triangle within which French identity can evolve, in a space that can accommodate the contradictions and paradoxes that the singers sometimes embody. Indeed, the fact that these paradoxes are expressed, in the trio, through three different artists, means that

²¹ Kelly, p.156.

there is a more open space for contradictions: paradoxes are more easily accepted, when the contradictory values or statements do not seem to originate from the same source. If, for example, Ferré can be seen to be too political and revolutionary, then Brel counterbalances him; but the values expressed by both singers, however contradictory, will be embraced by the same individuals.

What precedes has further illustrated the dialectic revolt/status quo that has underpinned French debates over identity since the taking root of the Third Republic. The main cultural debates that have been identified here, such as the issue of memory, the role of women in society, or the importance of supporting national culture, mainly revolve around the necessity to recover from the war. For France in the 1950s and 1960s, recovering from the war, from a cultural perspective, meant reconciling itself with its own history and social reality, and reconciling itself with its new position on the international scene by coping with modernity. This need to recover from the inside as well as from the outside is particularly well illustrated by France's confused reaction to America's growing influence; as Kuisel observed, 'a sense of nationalism is usually constructed by a kind of dialectic with "others"', and 'America served as the other that helped the French to imagine, construct, and refine their collective sense of self'.²² France's attitude towards America not only enlightens us about its international position, but also about its own internal identity conflicts, which are reflected in the debates over the status of *chanson* in a new, American-dominated, music world.

²² Kuisel, p.6.

c – France's attitude towards America: consequences on post-war chanson

Until the Second World War, France was one of the main international powers, and even after its prominence declined, the country remained animated by a desire to distinguish itself. Since the Second World War, the most famous symbol of this desire has probably been De Gaulle. The way he dealt with the decolonisation problem and his reluctance to surrender the colonies testify to his attachment to an idea of (or a nostalgia for) French greatness. The most significant aspect of his position was his determination to resist American influence and even to stand up to America. He opposed France's participation in NATO under the pretext that it was predominantly ruled by the United States. He failed to impose his view, but in 1966 it was under his influence that France left the integrated command of the organisation. The only reason he accepted the idea of a European community was because he saw it as a way to stand up to America, and he was against Great Britain's admission to the Community since he did not want America's 'Trojan horse' to get into Europe. These historical events are important because they show how De Gaulle contributed to developing the idea that America was a threat to 'l'exception française', an idea which remained alive, in the form of *gaullisme*, throughout the 1950s and 1960s – and is still so today to a certain extent.

This anti-American feeling is due to the fact that from the First World War onwards, America has had a growing influence in Europe, and as Looseley suggests, since the First World War with the Dawes plan and since the Second World War with the Marshall plan, France has been in a 'logic of economic Americanisation'.²³ The French reaction to this was never unanimous; some received it with open arms, some

²³ David Looseley, *Popular Music in Contemporary France* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2003), p.22.

firmly rejected it, and this dialectic of acceptance/rejection of American influence has become typical of French culture.

As was mentioned in the introduction, scholars who study *chanson* do not usually translate the term when they write in English, as if the art of ‘*chanson*’ was a typically French genre with no equivalent in Britain or America. This, of course, does not mean that it is the only type of popular music in France, and although *chanson* is incontestably important, other types of songs exist, and the different musical revolutions that have shaped English-speaking culture have also occurred in France. It could indeed be argued that the true exceptionalism of the French tradition is not only *chanson* itself; it is rather the contiguity – within a common evolution – of *chanson* and other types of music. But because of its nature, because *chanson* – to refer back to Paul Zumthor’s categorisation of songs – is a genre in which the investment of the lyrics by musicality is limited,²⁴ it mainly addresses French-speaking people, and has become a symbol of *typical* French song.

Having suffered the effects of two wars, the French economy was relatively stagnant after the Liberation whereas the American economy had not stopped developing and was promoting a cult of the new, which eventually reached Europe; this phenomenon, as has already been mentioned, has been very closely analysed by Kristin Ross.²⁵ During the Occupation, anything that was related to America or Great Britain was banned by the Germans, from music to clothing items. Listening or playing jazz or American music, especially swing, thus became a sign of resistance to the occupying forces. Such music therefore became popular among the opponents of Pétain and this

²⁴ See p.69.

²⁵ Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: MIT Press, 1995).

popularity remained – even increased – after the Liberation. Besides, American soldiers had been present on French soil since the First World War, bringing their own music with them,²⁶ so the French were already familiar with American tunes through jazz. This illustrates the fact that despite the reluctance of some politicians and some intellectuals to adopt an American style, it became very popular among the masses – and the economists. Boris Vian is a good example of this dualistic French attitude: he is indeed famous for having mocked and disregarded pop music, considering it intellectually inferior to traditional *chanson*, but at the same time, he had been playing jazz music since his youth, thereby adopting a style that originated in America. Hence the importance of the notion of ‘dialectic’ mentioned above: the French have been both attracted to and afraid of American culture, and this internal conflict has created a key dynamic that has shaped French culture in the 20th century.

The craze for American music was seen as frightening, because it started to ‘contaminate’ typically French productions. France indeed not only started adopting Britain’s and America’s music, but it also imitated their pop music industry, and ‘by 1939, the balance of artistic and economic influence had shifted in favour of London and the USA’.²⁷ As Looseley explains, since the beginning of the century, typically French café-concerts had started to give way to more English-type music halls, and among others he gives the example of the famous *Folies-Bergères* and *Olympia*. France therefore needed to try and catch up with British and American evolution. The first attempt to do so was by Eddie Barclay who ‘took the risk of importing the new microgroove record’ from the USA.²⁸ He even changed his name to make it sound more American, and other singers, like Johnny Hallyday did the same. Barclay can be said to have inaugurated the Americanisation of French song, and it is true that the best way for

²⁶ Looseley *Popular Music in Contemporary France*, p 16.

²⁷ Looseley *Popular Music in Contemporary France*, p.15.

²⁸ Looseley, *Popular Music in Contemporary France* p.16.

new French record companies to create their own market was to imitate successful US or British bands. This is the reason why the French pop of the sixties is full of English or American songs translated into French. The French music industry copied American economic tactics, and in the same period, the radio station Europe 1 introduced 'les pratiques américaines du hit parade et du tube de l'été'.²⁹ American influence had been present in France since early in the century, and as the United States started dominating the world economically, France had no other choice than to adapt its musical tradition to the new economic context.

In such a context, it is true that *chanson* as illustrated by Brel, Brassens, and Ferré, did not follow an American capitalist logic. As discussed in Chapter Two, their music was not suitable for dancing, the three singers were neither glamorous nor keen to comply with media requirements of celebrity, and they sold fewer discs than rock and pop singers. Brel is even famous for having had an argument with his producer Eddie Barclay whom he accused of having produced and sold too many copies of his last album.³⁰ Chapter Two has also discussed the fact that, as opposed to the shows of rock and pop singers, the public performances of Brel, Brassens, and Ferré were almost ostentatiously simple and bare. All of this added to the singers' authenticity and to the idea that not following the American logic of the music industry meant being more French.

As was observed in Chapter Two, *chanson* and rock music co-existed for many years without undermining each other: in the France of the 1950s and 1960s, there was a market for both genres, and rock and *chanson* artists generally respected each others' work. They had the same record companies and the charts mixed their songs in their

²⁹ Pierre Saka and Yann Plougastel, *La Chanson française et francophone* (Baume-les-Dames: Larousse, 1999) p.47.

³⁰ *Chorus: les cahiers de la chanson n°25: Spécial Jacques Brel*, (Brézolles: Les Éditions du Verbe, Autumn 1998), p.139.

placing of the best sellers. They even started influencing each other in an enriching way. As we have seen, Ferré, for example, made abundant use of the new sounds and rhythms brought in by rock music; he even collaborated with the rock band 'Zoo' for a few months. Brassens was very influenced by jazz music and gave most of his melodies jazz rhythms. The influence between *chanson* and American-born music was mutual – although in very unequal proportions; and although *chanson* is a French phenomenon, an artist like Frank Sinatra owes some of his greatest hits to Jacques Brel (*If you go away* is an adaptation of *Ne me quitte pas*) and Claude François (*My Way* comes from the less poetic *Comme d'habitude*). Brel was abundantly translated and adapted into English, and his songs has been sung by the likes of David Bowie, Nina Simone, and Ray Charles.

The fact that despite the generally harmonious coexistence of *chanson* and rock and pop music, singers like Brel, Brassens and Ferré were perceived as the defenders of a tradition threatened by an aggressive imperialism testifies to an ambiguous attitude of society towards the place of Americanisation in French culture, and once again illustrates the paradoxical acceptance/rejection of American culture. Ferré sang against capitalism, the music industry and globalisation, but integrated many American-born techniques into his music; Brel hated American capitalism and what it represented, but had a fascination for the 'Far-West' and the promises of future and adventure associated with it. Brel's obsession with the Wild West is actually a perfect allegory of the trio's dualistic attitude (and possibly French society's) towards America: it is appealing and full of promises, but it is dangerous and destructive once it has become too real. The three singers, in other words, embody the sentiment that America and its culture have many qualities as long as these qualities are supported by a traditional home-grown

culture; and given the growing influence of American culture in the post-war period, it was seen as a necessity to support and democratise French national culture.

The trio Breil-Brassens-Ferré, as the second part of this chapter will examine, embodies the paradoxes underlying post-war French cultural debates, in that their works and personae reflect the same tensions as the ones that animate post-war society. They illustrate the difficulty encountered by the French in coping with war memory, they embody an ideal continuity in history that reconciles past and present, they embody the tension between liberalism and conservatism that animates the social and moral values of post-war France, and finally, they reflect the ambivalent attitude of the country towards modernisation (and, by extension, towards America) characterised notably by the insistence on French culture and on the importance of democratising it. However, in order to better understand how, behind the liberalism and revolt that they represent (and that was identified through the drawing of their public profiles in Chapter Three), they also symbolise conservative and old-fashioned values, it is essential to discuss how the three artists embody a *symbolic* revolt that reconciles revolt and order and that represented France's only possible route towards cultural reconstruction.

3) The trio as an embodiment of symbolic revolt

Breil, Brassens and Ferré, as the previous chapter has observed, revolted against authorities in their songs or in the media, but they also claimed the right to revolt only verbally, and insisted that their verbal violence served pacifism. They constantly reminded audience and interviewers that they were not politicians, that they did not deliver messages and that they did not believe in collective solutions. Such an attitude is

consistent with the attitude of a society that aspired to both revolt and order. The post-war period, as was mentioned earlier in this chapter, was favourable to the development of a specific kind of antiestablishment spirit: certain French people wanted to revolt, but without really wanting to assume the consequences of revolution, they were what Chapter One has referred to as traditionalist non-conformists. This implies that the revolutionary fervour of the period was *per se* its own finality: the act of revolting was more important than the expected result of the revolt. This is why it may be argued that revolt, in the post-war French mentality, had a determining ritual dimension, according to the definition of the rite proposed by René Girard.

Girard, in *La Violence et le sacré*, explains that there is a sacrificial crisis at the origin of each society.³¹ He states that reciprocal violence (made of all the taboos that threaten social unity) is an intrinsic quality of human beings and that a society can only exist from the moment when a cathartic event will make it possible to repress this violence, thereby preserving the cultural order. This cathartic event manifests itself in the form of a first spontaneous lynching of a scapegoat victim, lynching which brings order into the community by creating a unity that would be impossible to reach in a state of reciprocal violence. It is this first lynching that Girard calls ‘crise sacrificielle’. The rite is the repetition of this first lynching; it is the willingness to reproduce the model of an anterior crisis in order to obtain the same effects. All the dangers, real or imaginary, that threaten the community, are assimilated with the worst danger with which a society can be confronted: the sacrificial crisis. Through the rite, through the reproduction of the sacrificial crisis, the community eliminates these dangers, as it had on the first occasion. The rite itself then becomes a cathartic element. But what is

³¹ René Girard, *La Violence et le sacré* (Paris: Grasset, 1972), edn (Paris: Hachette Littérature coll. Pluriel, 1998).

interesting is that Girard insists on the fact that the ritual thought knows *how* the benefits can be obtained, but it is incapable of understanding *why* it acts as it does.³²

In the context of this study, revolt (and in particular the type of revolt expressed by the trio) can be compared with a rite, and can therefore be seen as a cathartic element that allows a symbolic reproduction of the first violent revolution – the French Revolution – which was supposed to have liberated the country from misery, with the intention of restoring cultural order. This idea of revolt considered as a rite is not new: many ethnologists agree that revolt and demonstrations in France reflect a desire to recreate the origins of the republican nation.³³ But Girard's analysis enables us to develop this idea further. He explains that the community is simultaneously attracted to and repelled by its own origin; it constantly needs to relive it in a disguised form. It is important for the community always to repeat the pattern of the successfully overcome crisis which is the unanimous violence against a scapegoat victim. This idea is illustrated, among others, by the revolution of 1848, the Paris Commune, the Popular Front, and May '68, which were all periods of popular enthusiasm that were supposed to be reminiscent of the atmosphere of the French Revolution.

The French Revolution is a recurrent reference in the work of Brel, Brassens, and Ferré, and there are many allusions to the Bastille and the '14 juillet' in their songs; but it is interesting to notice that most of the time, these references are either ironic or desperate, which implies that despite the appeal of the Revolution, it is considered to be partially unaccomplished since it has not resolved all the problems of society. The recurrence of revolutionary symbols in the songs reveal the singers' obsession with the idea of revolution, but it also reveals their awareness of the fact that any revolutionary ideal is impossible to achieve: the singers seem to be torn between the moral duty to

³² Girard, p.148.

³³ See, for example, the analyses of May '68 and the notion of revolt in France in *Le Magazine littéraire* n° 365: *éloge de la révolte*, (May 1998).

revolt and the desperate willingness to stop revolting for nothing. The revolt as expressed through the work of Brel, Brassens, and Ferré, then, serves less a real political purpose than a cathartic one, which is why it can be said to have a ritual dimension.

According to Girard, the true purpose of the rite is to express the solidarity of the group in the face of a threatening event or an uncertain future. The intellectuals' and artists' revolutionary enthusiasm, in the post-war period, can therefore be interpreted as a ritual reaction. Faced with the inhumanity of which human beings are capable, it is not surprising that intellectuals used revolt and despair, which, through the symbol of the French Revolution, are at the origin of modern French society, in order to try and re-establish their faith in individuals, and preserve social order. The work of Brel, Brassens, and Ferré, in the anti-authoritarian spirit that they convey, expresses a certain violence, but also contributes to the cohesion of the community, at a time when society seems in crisis.

In the post-war context, French society was 'threatened' in many ways: as has already been mentioned, it was in crisis on a political, economical, and cultural level. One of the imperatives for politicians and intellectuals alike was therefore to help people find new landmarks that would restore their faith in their country and help them find their place in society, thereby resolving the 'chaotic' situation. The trauma of the war had therefore to be overcome, and in order to do so, continuity had to be found between past and present. However, establishing a link between the pre-war and post-war periods meant defining the significance, within French history, of the defeat of June 1940, Collaboration, the Occupation, Resistance, the victory of May 1945, and the 'Épuration'. The ways in which officials, intellectuals, artists, and the public dealt with

the memory of the war and post-war periods, and established a link between past and present, therefore became an important part of the healing process. Officials, on the one hand, decided to dissociate the country from any events likely to threaten the continuity of its historical logic – notably, France’s collaborationist history. Most artists and intellectuals, on the other hand, many of whom, as we have seen, had anti-authoritarian sympathies, gradually revolted against these official denials, and defended the memory of individuals who had lived through a period which they could not so easily forget or dismiss. This explains why, after the war, the intellectuals and artists who wanted to rebuild their faith in human beings came up against the State memory and nurtured their works with resentment against everything that represented the State (such as the police, the army, or the justice system).

The history of the French Republic has known several crises linked to public memory; but the post-war period in France is particularly rich in denials and untold stories, whether regarding the Vichy government or colonial wars. Vichy having been the official French government until the Allies’ victory, the regime was never truly denied; however, the way in which De Gaulle talked about it in his speeches after coming to power, gradually dissociated France from Pétain’s government. In a famous speech on 25 August 1944, encouraged to proclaim the Republic, he stated: ‘la République n’a jamais cessé d’être.[...] Vichy fut toujours et demeure nul et non avenu. Moi-même je suis le président du gouvernement de la République. Pourquoi irais-je la proclamer?’³⁴ France, partly under De Gaulle’s influence, minimised Vichy’s legacy: claiming the illegitimacy of the Pétain government meant sparing the history of the Republic the duty to assume it. It was only in the 1970s, and mainly through artists, intellectuals, and historians, that the magnitude of France’s collaborationist past started

³⁴ Zeraffa-Dray, p.143.

to be unveiled. Sonia Combe points to the significance of Robert Paxton's work *La France de Vichy*, published in France in 1973, and of Marcel Ophüls's film *Le Chagrin et la Pitié*, which shattered the erstwhile hegemonic vision of Vichy.³⁵ A similarly reluctant memory has been at stake with regard to the Algerian war since the end of the conflict in 1962. The conflict lasted eight years, but was never officially recognised as a war: Algeria being, at the time, part of French national territory, the military intervention was officially only the repression of national rebels. It was only in 1999 that soldiers who fought in Algeria were officially granted the title of war veterans.

All such denials and concealments testify to a confrontation between State memory and human memory, between the Official and the human being. *Human beings* had the duty not to forget what had actually happened to themselves and to other men and women, but as officials had also understood, *citizens* had to believe in the continuity of their history. Individuals, in other words, felt obliged to revolt against the denials encouraged by the authorities but they also felt that they had to accept them. This is why it can be argued that *symbolically* revolting against the authorities provided people with an opportunity to move forward. The anti-authoritarian cultural movements of the post-war period can be interpreted as a re-enactment of the original sacrificial crisis evoked by Girard, with the aim of restoring and maintaining order in society. The confrontation between the State and the individual, between official memory and that of artists, intellectuals, and the public, revives the traditional dialectic of the private and the public; for in the aftermath of the Second World War, French people were doubly wounded: they had been hurt as private and public individuals, as human beings and as citizens. This conflict between the public and the private, which was exacerbated in the war and post-war context, is one of the reasons why the symbolical revolt alluded to in

³⁵ Sonia Combe, *Archives interdites: les peurs françaises face à l'Histoire contemporaine* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1994), pp.100-101.

Girard's theory, was such an essential part of the reconstruction of France's conception of itself: symbolically revolting against authorities had more of a cohesive effect than a divisive one. And the trio Brel-Brassens-Ferré, as the next section will examine in further detail, because of its anti-authoritarian connotations and its non-threatening dimension, seems an ideal embodiment of this symbolic revolt. Hatred of authority is omnipresent in the songs of Brel, Brassens, and Ferré, in which policemen, judges and servicemen are always despicable, stupid, or ridiculous characters. But at the same time, because of the singers' open lack of interest in politics, their revolt and criticisms represented no real threat to social order.

As Chapter Two pointed out, Zumthor, in his study of orality, observes that oral culture is often more developed in societies that live in a poor natural environment, and suggests that it might explain 'la fonction vitale qu'assume la chanson pour nos jeunes depuis vingt ou trente ans, dans l'indigence intellectuelle, esthétique et morale que nous leur avons faite'.³⁶ What Zumthor points out here, is the cathartic dimension of song; for the ideal of revolt is not dissociable from the ideal of social cohesion, and song has an undeniable rallying power. Song is therefore a good way through which to accomplish a revolution, it is a weapon, but a symbolic one: song can embody the ideal of the revolution without the armed struggle; song is, as Ferré sings in *Les Anarchistes*: 'Des couteaux pour trancher / Le pain de l'Amitié / Et des armes rouillées / Pour ne pas oublier'. Song enables the listener to revolt violently, but without physically destroying anything: it enables one to conciliate violence and humanism, and therefore to reconcile social duty (violence) with individual duty (pacifism).

By revolting against authority, the singers also rebuild their faith in human beings, which implicitly contributes to redefining the identity of society, which itself

³⁶ Paul Zumthor, *Introduction à la poésie orale* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil Collection poétique, 1983) p.163.

contributes to redefining the citizen; in other words, their anti-authoritarianism, their violence, and their revolt, in the post-war context, actually contributes to the double rebuilding (public and private) of the individual. The symbolic revolt that the trio embodies, with its strong cohesive dimension, and its reconciliation of the public and the private, illustrates the post-war paradoxical desire for a total revolution and for peace and order.

In order to understand the 'Frenchness' of the trio Brel-Brassens-Ferré, it is necessary, then, to understand the singers in relation to the ideological issues of the post-war period. The previous chapter has shown that the singers' qualities that most appealed to the public all had to do with revolt, originality and breaking away from normality. But when examined from the post-war perspective, these qualities actually reveal a lot more than the desire of a society to be seen as avant-garde and revolutionary. Each of these qualities has a dual dimension that reflects profound contradictions in the mindset of French society. Although, for example, the revolutionary aspect of the trio is one of the most appealing to the public, the singers are actually far from being revolutionaries themselves; the revolutionary dimension of their work and personae is genuinely non-threatening and purely symbolic. The public's attraction to the singers' revolt is therefore more a sign of their paradoxical aspirations for both revolt and the status quo. However, as the application of Girard's theories to the trio has revealed, these paradoxical aspirations are unavoidable in the post-war context: they represent the only possible means of reconciliation between the French and their cultural identity.

As discussed in the first part of this chapter, the three singers and their work not only illustrate essential themes of the cultural debate of post-war France – such as revolt, poetry, and authenticity – they also allow space for the contradictions and paradoxes inherent to the expression of these themes. As has been argued, the tensions between conservatism and modernity, traditionalism and non-conformism, or status quo and revolt, have animated French debates over identity since the dawn of modernisation; in the post-war context, France’s dual attitude towards modernity was accompanied by a similar attitude towards its history. Remembering the wars was a source of conflict between official and individual memories, and the *chanson* of which Brel, Brassens, and Ferré are the representatives, provided a medium through which to reconcile the public and the private in a symbolic revolt. Through symbolic revolt, then, the trio represented the possibility of reconstructing French identity from the inside (by reconciling French society with its own history) and from the outside (by presenting it with the possibility of embracing modernity without morally betraying its own cultural traditions).

The first part of this chapter, then, has focused on *how* the trio Brel-Brassens-Ferré, because of its potential to reconcile paradoxes, represents an ideal support for a myth of Frenchness. The final part of the chapter will examine the values and ideals through which the singers and their work carry out their own synthesis between traditionalism and non-conformism. Previous chapters have established that one of the key aspects of the trio’s effective representation of Frenchness was the permeability existing between the image of the singers as they present themselves, and the image of how they were perceived by the public. Previous chapters, then, have examined in detail how the singers were interpreted and what ideals and ‘concepts’ (to refer back to Roland Barthes’ terminology) were projected onto the trio. The following section of this

chapter focuses on the ideas and values that the singers themselves projected through their songs. This final part, therefore, will particularly direct its attention to the lyrics of the singers' most famous songs, and to the artists' characteristics most discussed in the media; indeed, these songs and characteristics represent the main point of contact between the trio and the public, and are consequently the main medium through which society is likely to have perceived or projected the ideals, values, and issues of its own identity conflicts. What follows, then, examines how, behind their nonconformist status, Brel, Brassens, and Ferré illustrate the post-war reassertion of traditionalism.

B – Reconciling traditionalism and non-conformism

1) Memory and the image of a timeless France

a – War in the songs of Brel, Brassens, and Ferré

War is a recurring theme in post-war *chanson* in general, and is also omnipresent in the songs of Barbara or Ferrat in particular. As was mentioned in Chapter One, Brel, Brassens, and Ferré were not unique in the genre and had common points – on stylistic and thematic levels – with many other singer-songwriters. But what is particularly interesting with the trio is that the three singers deal with the theme of war in different yet complementary ways, which further nurtures the dichotomy revolt/order of the trio, and illustrates how it assimilates and reconciles paradoxes.

Whether post-war *chansons* deal with a specific war (mainly one of the two World Wars) or with war in general, it is a theme which appears in songs in a variety of ways. War can be the main subject of a song, like in Brassens' *Les deux oncles*, for

example, which describes two uncles fighting the Second World War on opposite sides; or it can simply be a context, a memory that adds a bitter note to the story of the song, as in Brel's *L'Eclusier*, for example, in which a man approached by an attractive woman remarks: 'J'aimerais leurs jeux sans cette guerre / Qui m'a un peu trop abîmé'. But in both cases, the presence of the war is real and powerful. There are two main tendencies in post-war songs that deal with the war: one that is unambiguously militant, exhorting the listener to direct action and fighting, and a more pacifist tendency which supports ideals more than specific political causes. The two tendencies are not antithetical since they both equally embody the refusal to accept established social order. The difference is that 'militant' songs openly locate themselves in a precise historical context – as is often the case in Ferré's songs for example – whereas 'pacifist' songs usually represent the perspective of singers who only take into consideration the individual, and only believe in individual and idealistic solutions – as is very much the case in most of Brel's songs, and in many of Brassens'.

In Ferré's songs, war is often depicted as a curse imposed by a government on its people, and the singer usually establishes an almost Manichean opposition between the evil officials and the good individuals. Despite the fact that Ferré often sang against armed struggle, war is still described, in some of his songs, as a noble and important cause; and although he denied being political and a militant, the fact that his concerts regularly provoked the violent enthusiasm of anarchists or communists proves that whether he liked it or not, there was a political dimension to the perception of his work and to his character. Among his favourite targets, as has already been mentioned, are De Gaulle and Franco who represent, in his work, symbols of oppressive authority. Despite having repeatedly criticised De Gaulle, however, Ferré is the only one in the trio to have clearly engaged with the theme of the Resistance, mainly, it is true, through his setting

to music of Aragon's poems. One of the most famous and successful collaborations between the poet and the musician is the song *L'Affiche Rouge*, written by Aragon in 1955 and set to music and sung by Ferré in 1961, which is a tribute to the 'Groupe Manouchian', a group of foreign resistance fighters who had fought alongside the French Resistance, and who were executed by the Nazis in 1944.

Ferré's position is not unique in this regard, and many artists and intellectuals have criticised De Gaulle's authoritarianism, without denying the essential part that he played in the French Resistance. It could even be argued that artists and intellectuals were the only ones who could legitimately criticise De Gaulle, for he was too much of a symbol of the honour of the country to be *politically* criticised in an acceptable way: De Gaulle could be criticised for what some of his policies, particularly in the context of the decolonisation wars, represented ideologically – which artist and intellectuals, including Ferré, did – but he was too emblematic of the Resistance and had done too much for the country to be blamed by politicians. Only an artist could criticise, as Ferré did in *Mon Général*, De Gaulle's authoritarianism and his manipulation of memory: 'Mon Général j'ai souvenance / Que vous avez sauvé la France / C'est Jeanne d'Arc qui me l'a dit [...] Mon Général pour vos vacances / J'vous raconterai l'histoire de France / Des fois que vous comprendriez'. This can partly explain why, in the post-war context, the perspective of artists and intellectuals, which is not directly political, was so important: it was the only way through which people could hear an alternative version of what they had lived. It can also explain why Ferré, despite the fact that he and his work are less widely accessible than Brassens and Brel's, *had* to be part of the trio. Ferré, with the militant revolt associated with his work, brings into the trio an important characteristic of post war French mentality: the need to revolt against individuals or ideas against whom/which it is outrageous to revolt.

Brel and Brassens deal with the war in a very different way to Ferré, and their songs are in general more expressive of a philosophy of peace than a line of action; they do not really take into account political realities, and denounce violence and war generally, for what it does to human beings. Brel's and Brassens's songs often contrast (arguably, in an arbitrary and simplistic way) the mediocrity of the soldier with the greatness of human beings, and armed struggle with love. The army is systematically criticised, accused of corruption, arrogance, and stupidity. Brel's songs abundantly illustrate this idea; in *Au suivant*, for example, he sings: 'Cette voix qui sentait l'ail / Et le mauvais alcool / C'est la voix des nations / Et c'est la voix du sang'; in *Caporal Casse-Pompon*, he ridicules a soldier: 'Mon ami est un doux poète / Dans son jardin quand vient l'été / Faut l'voir planter ses mitraillettes / Ou bien creuser ses p'tites tranchées'; and in *Fernand*, he despairs: 'Et puis les adultes sont tellement cons / Qu'ils nous feront bien une guerre / Alors je viendrai pour de bon / Dormir dans ton cimetière'. In Brel's work, the war is often presented as the painful destruction of his childhood; Brel, unlike Brassens and Ferré, was only a child during the Second World War, and therefore often describes it in his songs from a child's perspective. This, of course, entitles him to disregard completely the political dimension of the war and focus entirely on the human and individual dimensions; for Brel, wars destroy families, destroy men and women, and destroy childhood. In *Mon enfance*, for example, he sings: 'Je volais je le jure / Je jure que je volais / Mon cœur ouvrait les bras / Je n'étais plus barbare / Mais la guerre arriva / Et nous voilà ce soir'; another illustrative example is the song *Mai 40* (although the song cannot have had much influence on the 1950s and 1960s audience, since it was only released in 2003) in which Brel sings: 'Moi de mes onze ans d'altitude / Je découvrais éberlué / des soldatesques fatiguées / ... / Ce mai 40 a

salué / Quelques Allemands disciplinés / Qui écrasaient ma belgitude / L'honneur avait perdu patience'. Brel's description of war as an incomprehensible fatality is likely to have found a receptive audience among people who had lost many of their relatives, without always being able to convince themselves that it had been worth it.

Brassens' way of dealing with the war is similar to Brel's in that it disregards the political motivations of conflicts to focus on their human consequences. Unlike Brel, though, Brassens is rarely directly sentimental about it and rather uses irony, sarcasm, and even grotesque imagery to denounce the inhumanity of war. This is particularly the case in the songs *Les Deux oncles*, discussed previously, and *La Guerre de 14-18*; in the latter song, irony is taken to extremes in the last stanza when Brassens sings: 'Du fond de son sac à malice / Mars va sans doute à l'occasion / En sortir une [guerre] un vrai délice / Qui me fera grosse impression / En attendant je persévère / À dire que ma guerre favorite / Celle mon colon que je voudrais faire / C'est la guerre de quatorze dix-huit'. Although *La Guerre de 14-18*, probably because of its unambiguously farcical tone, was never publicly deemed too offensive, other anti-war songs of Brassens were – in particular *Les Deux oncles*, as discussed in the previous chapter. What is interesting in Brassens' songs about war, is that behind the irony, sarcasm, or the grotesque is always a certain gravity: he makes fun of soldiers, of political strategies, and even of death, but one can always sense that he is very serious about deploring the unnecessary death of an individual at war. As his 1972 song *Mourir pour des idées* testifies, he seriously objects to people's deaths being manipulated by war ideologies: 'Encor s'il suffisait de quelques hécatombes / Pour qu'enfin tout changeât, qu'enfin tout s'arrangeât! / Depuis tant de grands soirs que tant de têtes tombent / Au paradis sur terre on y serait déjà'. Brassens, in contrast to Brel, talks about war from an adult's perspective, and the seriousness with which he condemns the

suffering of war victims definitely touched a post-war society disgusted by the war and animated by a sentiment of ‘plus jamais ça’.

Brel, Brassens, and Ferré, then, all condemn armed struggle, denounce the unjustified suffering imposed by war on human beings, and adopt an unambiguously antimilitarist position. But their approaches to antimilitarism and the condemnation of war are different, and each one finds an echo, in its own way, in post-war French society. Ferré responds to a need to recognise the nobility of ideological fighting, while at the same time vehemently attacking authorities and officials for their lack of understanding of human nature; Brel, through his mainly emotional depiction of the war, touches society’s intimate feelings wounded by the war; as for Brassens, his simultaneous use of humour and gravity echoes the feeling that war is an absurdity with serious consequences, and that whatever the political reasons that have motivated a war, they are unacceptable on an individual, human level.

b – War as an obsessive spectre

In the same way as Derrida talked about the spectre of Marx – though the analogy should be used with care – one could talk about the spectre of the war in the singers’ work and in society. Derrida explains that ‘avant de savoir si on peut faire la différence entre le spectre du passé et le spectre du futur, il faut peut-être se demander si l’effet de spectralité ne consiste pas à déjouer cette opposition, voire cette dialectique, entre la présence effective et son autre’.³⁷ The war as evoked by the trio thwarts the opposition between past and future mentioned by Derrida: the three singers have in common that they lived through the Second World War, and yet, their work is less haunted by this

³⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Spectres de Marx* (Paris: Galilée, 1993), p.72.

particular war than by the 'idea of war'. A very powerful example of the obsessive dimension of the war can be found in Brel's song *Zangra*, in which a soldier spends his life being promoted and waiting for the 'enemy' that will make him a hero; the enemy eventually comes, but too late: 'Je m'appelle Zangra / Hier trop vieux Général / J'ai quitté Belonzo / Qui domine la plaine / Et l'ennemi est là / Je ne serai pas héros'. This song exalts the power of the obsession with war, since it even ruins a man's life by its absence.

By uprooting the suffering provoked by war from its temporal reality, the singers and their work provide their audience with the opportunity to grieve and remember their own experience of the war without their moral conscience being torn apart by historical and political realities. Even in Ferré's work, which contains many allusions to specific historical events, the historical and political references, although they do retain their significance, seem absorbed in a kind of timelessness; this can be explained partly by the way in which Ferré chants his lyrics, giving them an almost ethereal dimension, and partly by the cross-contaminations of the different atmospheres of his songs – some of which, like *La Mémoire et la mer*, create an impression of subjective temporality: 'Il pleure de mon firmament / Des années lumières et j'en laisse / Je suis le fantôme de Jersey'.

This subversion of temporality will be further examined below, but as far as the memory of the war is concerned, it can already be argued that Brel, Brassens, and Ferré free the notion of war from all chronological restrictions. Chronological requirements give up their place to the requirement of a correspondence between the feelings provoked by the spectral presence of war and the artistic device (the song, or a poetic image within the song) that represents these feelings. War, then, becomes an obsessive presence, a 'rumeur qui vient de là', to use Ferré's words in *La Mémoire et la*

mer, which expresses itself in the songs in the form of poetic images, of stories or characters, all remarkable for their uniqueness; for each evocation of the war is a personal construction: everybody remembers as they can and as they want to. Evoking the war, in the songs, is an attempt at finding a balance between individual memory and history. Through their work, the singers carry out their own synthesis of memory and history, and thereby contribute to providing their audience with an acceptable vision of historical events which reconciles contradictions and paradoxes, and reconciles society with its past. As the following section will examine, their disregard for the rules of temporality expands beyond their memory and representations of the war; Brel, Brassens and Ferré also depict in their work the image of an idealised, timeless France.

c – Nostalgia for an idyllic past

Brel, Brassens, and Ferré all express, in different ways, a nostalgia for better times. In Brel's work, these better times take the form of an idealised childhood, in Brassens', they are an imaginary medieval golden age, and for Ferré, they are the times when Paris and its inhabitants were artistically and ideologically flamboyant. The titles of some of Ferré's songs are illustrative of the singer's nostalgia: *Paname, Paris Spleen, Quartier Latin, Paris je ne t'aime plus, Paris c'est une idée*. Ferré's entire work is tinged with the bitter belief that artistic and poetic creativity, as evoked by the memory of inter-war Montmartre and the Rive Gauche, belongs to the past and has been replaced by the corrupted productions of industrialisation and modernisation. Several of his songs, such as *Les poètes*, for example, describe romantic artists that could belong to a picture of an idealised bohemian Paris: 'Ce sont de drôles de types / Qui vivent de leur plume / Ou qui ne vivent pas / C'est selon la saison' (*Les Poètes*). In some songs, such as *L'Age*

d'or, for example, he does express hope for a brighter future, but not on an artistic level: 'Nous aurons du pain / Doré comme les filles / Sous les soleils d'or / Nous aurons du vin / De celui qui pétille / Même quand il dort'.

Brassens' nostalgia seems less real than Ferré's and Brel's, since despite the several songs in which he expresses his regret at not having been born in the Middle-Ages, his references to a glorious medieval epoch are usually ironic. The nostalgic atmosphere of his songs is conveyed by the friendly and favourable attitude he has towards his old-fashioned characters, and by his obvious fascination with old sayings, archaic language, folkloric stories and characters, and traditional customs and ceremonials – particularly funerals. Commenting on the recurrence of the theme of death in the singer's work, Sara Poole remarks, echoing Pol Vandromme's observations, that 'Brassens' interest in the trappings of death reveals itself as, essentially, an enjoyment of the ceremonial associated with funerals'.³⁸ Brassens' songs indeed contain many descriptions of traditional religious funerals; but, being an atheist, the singer always insists on the aesthetic dimension of the ceremony rather than on the spiritual one, thereby turning the event into a folkloric one, which once again testifies to his attachment to traditional culture. In Brassens' songs, then, cultural traditions are revived and adapted to a modern context; chronology, folklore, popular culture, and authors from different centuries are all mixed in his work, creating continuity between an imaginary past and an imaginary backward-looking present.

Brel's idealisation of childhood represents another example of the way in which the trio uses nostalgia to convey a sense of continuity between past and present. For Brel, childhood symbolises the infinity of possibilities: children are adventurous, imprudent, they dream and have enough time ahead of them to believe that their dreams

³⁸ Sara Poole, *Brassens: Chansons* (London: Grant & Cutler, 2000), p.43.

can be achieved. Children are also innocent; childhood is, for Brel, a pure state that is eventually corrupted by wars and other aspects of adulthood. The corruption of childhood by adults is illustrated in many of Brel's songs. In *Mon enfance*, for example, he blames adults for having taken his dreams away from him: 'Mes oncles repus / M'avaient volé le far-west'; in *L'Enfance*, he explains: 'L'enfance / C'est encore le droit de rêver / Et le droit de rêver encore / Mon père était un chercheur d'or / L'ennui c'est qu'il en a trouvé'. The image of the never-ending quest is a very powerful one in Brel's work, and highly emblematic of his conception of life and childhood: for him, all men should dream and attempt to achieve their dreams; but since only children can dream – as adults are corrupted by middle-class aspirations – every man should aspire to remain a child.

The three singers' conceptions of an ideal past are therefore different and complementary. They have in common, however, an expression of their faith in a creativity, a spontaneity, and an unrestrained dynamism, which they do not seem to be able to find in the modern mentality, but which is still accessible to those who revive this idyllic past and use it to construct the present. The work of Brel, Brassens, and Ferré, expresses a desire for dynamism and a strong feeling about the value of 'past times'. 'Past times', however, are indefinite or unreal, and rarely refer to any specific moment in history; but they are emotional, which is precisely what is likely to touch the public. The singers' allusions to the past express the sentiments of many of their contemporaries, who were wary of modernity and who, as a result, idealised and personalised the subjective notion that is 'the past'. The trio's idyllic pasts are synonymous with adventure and risk-taking, and are therefore the exact opposite of the modern mentality that they associate with the *bourgeois* spirit; and from the singer's perspective, rejecting the values of modernisation and refusing to become bourgeois

represent the possibility of remaining young, and therefore living a dynamic and meaningful life. In the 1969 interview, when Cristiani asks Brel, Brassens, and Ferré if they feel that they have become adults, the three reply in the negative, and Brel gives an interesting explanation:

Le tout, c'est de savoir ce qu'on fait devant un mur; [...] tous les trois, instantanément, on a envie d'aller de l'autre côté du mur qui se dresse. Il n'y a que ça d'important et c'est ce qui prouve que nous ne sommes pas des adultes. Un type normal, qu'est-ce qu'il fait? Il construit un autre mur devant, il met un toit dessus et il s'installe.³⁹

Brel here implies that age is not necessarily a biological inevitability; it is also an attitude that can be manipulated by willpower. This is why Brel can talk about a 'jeunesse vieille' in *Jojo*, and can sing in *La Chanson des vieux amants*: 'Il nous fallut bien du talent / Pour être vieux sans être adultes'. Brassens expresses the same idea but slightly differently; the distinction that Brel makes between adults and children can be assimilated, in Brassens' work, to the distinction between idiots and other people. He clearly expresses his position on the subject in *Le Temps ne fait rien à l'affaire*: 'Qu'on ait vingt ans, qu'on soit grand-père / Quand on est con, on est con'. In his songs, the 'cons' are always the characters entrenched in the satisfaction of their social status and in the disciplined respect of proprieties; it is the case, for example, of the judge in *Le Gorille*: 'Le juge pensait impassible / 'Qu'on me prenne pour une guenon / C'est complètement impossible' / La suite lui prouva que non'. The idiots never question traditions, never challenge anything, and aspire to nothing that they do not already have; in this, they are comparable with Brel's adults.

The trio therefore redefines the border between childhood and adulthood and sets childish innocence as the essential quality of the intelligent and creative individual. For Ferré, as for Brel and Brassens, the child embodies boldness, disregard for

³⁹ Cristiani and Leloir, p.70.

conventions, and creative freedom. This particular imagery of childhood in the trio's works illustrates the fact that although time is a manipulator, it can also be manipulated. Brel, Brassens, and Ferré, then, are drawn to the past and manipulate time and their own memories. But they do not only do so on a personal, individual level: by abolishing the rigidity of chronology, they also create an atmosphere favourable to the reconciliation between traditional French values and modernity. Indeed, their work represents a world where time limits can be contravened, where adults can be young and children can be old, where the Middle Ages can be revived, and where the glorious and emotional moments of the past can be brought into the present in order to construct a personalised, acceptable modernity. In other words, despite the fact that the post-war period witnessed the decline of France's international prominence and forced the country to abide by the American standards of modernisation, the trio provides society with the possibility of inserting French traditional values in its reconstruction by adapting them to the modern context.

d – Picture of a traditional France

It has already been noted that each of the singers brings into the trio different qualities which, once associated, can be interpreted as one representation of the concept of Frenchness. Brassens, for example, brings in the image of the rural, grumpy and jolly Gaul; Brel is the passionate adventurer, and Ferré the revolted and passionate left-wing intellectual. The countries and characters that they depict in their songs similarly have sometimes complementary and sometimes contrasting qualities, but which together contribute to create the image of an idealised France, where frontiers between pre-war and post-war society are meaningless. Brel's 'Belgitude' – to use the singer's own

neologism – will be discussed in the following section, but it should be stressed that although he was not French and drew more pictures of Belgian landscapes and characters than of French ones, French people still recognised themselves in his songs, and his work has arguably been as influenced as Brassens and Ferré's by the state of post-war French society.

The impression of timelessness is particularly powerful in Brassens' work. Most of his songs are set in small villages and rural areas that seem to come out of tales or fables, and that portray non-realist stories and characters. The vocabulary he uses to describe houses or villagers' activities and clothes is evocative of a pre-industrialised, idyllic and unreal past. His characters, for example, work as shepherdesses or gravediggers, they live in 'chaumières', wear 'corsages', 'collerettes', and 'jupons'. The 'curé' and the 'gendarme', who are usually associated with rural village life, are recurrent characters in the songs. Although the guillotine was the official method of execution in France from the Revolution to 1982, criminals, in Brassens' songs, are hanged in public – except, interestingly, in *Le Gorille*, which is explicitly a song against the death penalty. Even the names of the characters are old-fashioned and reminiscent of past traditions; as Michel Beaufils observes: 'Brassens emprunte au folklore des personnages tels que Lison, Suzon, Ninon, Margot. Il met [...] en scène des bergères, de jeunes prétendants, dans de petites fables rustiques pleines d'humour'.⁴⁰ As Beaufils also remarks, Brassens' narrative style keeps his stories ageless: 'On remarque aussi l'intemporalité fréquente des narrations: "jadis"' (p.72). Moreover, the singer's medieval references and his deliberate linguistic archaisms, combined with occasional modern references, add to the a-temporality of the stories.

⁴⁰ Michel Beaufils *Brassens, poète traditionnel* (Paris: Imbert-Nicholas, 1976), p.47.

The characters in Brel's work are as unrealistic and colourful as in Brassens', although in a less bucolic and less obviously unreal way. Brel is an adventurous character and to him immobility is the worst thing that can happen to a man (as we saw in the previous chapter, women, in his opinion, are more sedentary). Throughout his work his obsession with the various elements that can stop a man from moving forward and exploring life is manifest (women, old age, and middle-class aspirations). When portraying female, old, or middle-class characters, Brel is therefore less concerned with being socially accurate in his descriptions than with conveying accurately the sense of immobility that surrounds his characters; this often results in the portrayal of stereotypical characters, more in keeping with the social imaginary than with the social reality. His old people, for example, are always peaceful and resigned; their lives are made up of an eternal everyday that has become meaningless: 'Leurs livres s'ensommeillent / Leurs pianos sont fermés / Le petit chat est mort / Le muscat du dimanche / Ne les fait plus chanter' (*Les Vieux*); 'Le piano n'est plus qu'un meuble / La cuisine pleure quelques sandwiches / Et eux ressemblent à deux derviches / Qui toupiant dans le même immeuble' (*L'Amour est mort*). Brel's representations of women will be discussed in the following section, but the most colourful characters in his work are undeniably the middle-class, the *bourgeois*. Their pathetic mediocrity, their narrow-mindedness, and their obsession with money and social promotion, are reminiscent of the stereotype of the *petit-bourgeois* created by Balzac's novels, and still part of today's social mythology. The song *Ces gens-là* contains the most evocative description of a miserable, petit-bourgeois family: each member of the family is a failure, and the daughter, who dreams about running away with her lover, never escapes the mediocrity of her condition: 'Parce que chez ces gens-là Monsieur / On ne s'en va pas / On ne s'en va pas Monsieur'. The same haunting immobility of the *bourgeoisie* is admirably

pictured in *Le Soir d'été* where the apathy of the inhabitants eventually contaminates the town: 'La ville aux quatre vents / Clignote le remords / Inutile et passant / De n'être pas un port'.

Ferré's work contains comparatively few characters, beside the omnipresent first person narrator. As has already been seen, he often mentions the names of real people, but his songs, unlike Brassens' and Brel's, are rarely little stories with characters and a setting. The main recurrent figures in his songs, are the artist, the poet, or the worker: his characters are usually abstract notions that do not relate to any concrete reality, but that remain evocative of the supposedly traditional French qualities identified in the previous chapter. As far as Ferré is concerned, the most significant feature of his work that contributes to the picture of a timeless France, is the omnipresence of a strong feeling of nostalgia for an idyllic past – which occasionally becomes a longing for a golden age to come.

2) Coping with modernity: Brel-Brassens-Ferré as a link with traditional French values

*a – The trio as 'solidly Third Republic'*⁴¹

In an article published in 1981, Christopher Pinet analysed the 'image of the French in the songs of Georges Brassens',⁴² but many of his observations are actually valid beyond Brassens' work, and equally apply to the three singers as a trio. In the article, Pinet argues that Brassens appealed to a majority of French people in the 1950s and 1960s because the values he advocated and represented responded to a need on the part of post-war France to redefine its identity in revived traditional values:

⁴¹ Christopher Pinet, 'The image of the French in the songs of Georges Brassens', *Contemporary French civilization*, vol. VI, 1-2 (Fall-Winter 1981), p. 283.

⁴² Pinet, 'The image of the French', pp.271-94.

In essence, Brassens appealed to almost every segment of French society and in terms that encouraged the affirmation of values and emotions which had been stifled during the Occupation. The values were solidly Third Republic, but it took Brassens, Brel, and Ferré to provide a link to a romanticized but more acceptable past. (283)

The main points on which Pinet insists in his depiction of Brassens as a defender of 'Third Republic' values are his 'self-characterization as unpatriotic' (272), a strong individualism, and a traditional criticism of authorities. He also insists on the fact that Brassens' non-threatening anti-authoritarianism echoed a general need to find a place in a society that had to reconstruct itself taking into account the ideological legacy of the Second World War:

Although individualism was hardly the invention of post World War II France, its expression by Brassens was especially important because the values espoused and offered by him were quickly appreciated and popularised as part of a personalized code (Léo Ferré and Jacques Brel became popular at about the same time as Brassens) in which one's own private values could defy definition or ideology and yet stamp that person with a special and unique identity. One could resist any new authority without ever having been part of the Resistance. (276)

Pinet's insightful observations can be developed further and applied to several aspects of the works of Brel, Brassens, and Ferré. Before analysing in further detail the individualism advocated by the trio, it can be instructive to examine the singers' cultural references, in order to highlight their 'Third Republic' dimension.

Although it is true that using the term 'Third Republic' as a qualifier for a set of values can seem excessive, it is also true that many of the values underpinning the works of the trio are characteristic of those which were advocated under the Third Republic, such as individualism and secularism. In this respect, the three singers can be considered to be the respectful sons of the Third Republic. The cultural references used in their songs are also typical of those that might have been taught in republican, secular primary schools of the first half of the twentieth century. Education through free, compulsory, and secular primary schooling was one of the main aspects of the Third

Republic's endeavour to entrench republican ideals in the population. Brassens, whose atheist father was a great admirer of the Third Republic school, went to a republican primary school, despite the reluctance of his very religious mother; and his work does contain many traces of his republican education. Ferré was brought up in a more conservative family and went to a very strict and religious high school, but his songs still bear the marks of primary school teaching. Brel was brought up in Belgium and did not, therefore, attend a republican primary school; but the way in which he pictures some of his school experiences, as in *Rosa* for example, still bears similarities with some of Brassens' own experiences. So although the singers received different types of education, the values they advocate in their songs and many of their cultural references did strike a chord with a great part of the population who had attended republican primary school.

La Fontaine, for example, is an author democratised by primary school, and he is abundantly alluded to in the songs of Brassens and Ferré. As Beaufile observed: 'Les ressemblances entre La Fontaine et Brassens sont trop flagrantes pour qu'il ne soit pas question d'emprunts.'⁴³ La Fontaine is also present in Ferré's songs, as in *La Muse en carte*: 'Je suis l'intérêt d'août foi d'animal et d'homme', or in *Le Camelot*: 'je donne [...] des greniers aux cigales / Des chansons aux fourmis'. Hugo, Baudelaire, and Rimbaud, are three other poets traditionally taught in primary school, and they are also regularly referred to in the trio's work. In a study about 'l'école de la Troisième République', Maurice Crubellier explained the aims of the republican school thus:

Les buts de Jules Ferry et de ses collaborateurs me semblent avoir été les suivants : mener à bien la reculturation des populations urbaines déculturées, substituer l'action de la République à celle de l'Église dans les campagnes restées croyantes et, ce faisant, unifier les esprits et les cœurs. Le patriotisme était le couronnement de l'œuvre d'éducation. En d'autres termes, la culture scolaire s'imposerait comme un cadre commun de pensée et de sensibilité, une commune

⁴³ Beaufile, p.73.

orientation des volontés. Elle serait associée plus étroitement que jamais à l'ordre socio-culturel, elle serait la garante de cet ordre.⁴⁴

It is true that the singers are far from being patriotic in their songs, but the three of them are well aware of the terms, symbols, and references that are familiar to their audiences, and many of these references have been disseminated by primary school. For example, allusions to symbols of the Republic and to the famous characters it has adopted – notably Jeanne d'Arc and Napoléon – are recurrent in the singers' works, whether used in a derogatory way or not. The singers use the same republican imagery to shock, like Ferré, singing about Jeanne d'Arc: 'C'est une fille qui avait de la technique / Malgré sa fin peu catholique',⁴⁵ or to be nostalgic about France's revolutionary past: 'Nous sommes allés faire un saut / Au boulevard du temps qui passe / En scandant notre "Ca ira" / Contre les vieux, les mous, les gras';⁴⁶ this suggests that the significance of republican symbols was taken for granted by the artists. Brel, although he made few references to French authors and heroes, did use familiar French landmarks, such as the Bastille, for example: 'On a détruit la Bastille / Mais ça n'a rien arrangé'. Jeanne d'Arc and Napoléon, of course, are not republican characters, but their enthusiastic ambition to save the nation or make it greater turned them into heroic figures admired by the Third Republic. Moreover, they symbolise two key periods of French history, and adopting their legacy contributed to recognising the continuity of French history, which was, according to Philippe Joutard, an essential endeavour of the Third Republic: 'l'enseignement historique donné dans les écoles de la République s'inscrit plutôt dans la tradition de la continuité mise en valeur par la monarchie de Juillet'.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Maurice Crubellier, 'D'une culture populaire à une autre: L'École de la Troisième République', in M. Bertrand, *Popular Traditions and Learned Culture in France* (Stanford: Stanford French and Italian Studies, 1985), p.154.

⁴⁵ Ferré, *Mon Général*.

⁴⁶ Brassens, *Boulevard du temps qui passe*.

⁴⁷ Philippe Joutard, 'Une passion française: l'histoire', in André Burguière, ed., *Histoire de la France, Les formes de la culture* (Paris: Seuil, 1993), p.543.

By mentioning, in their songs, famous French authors and historical events (Villon, La Fontaine, the Revolution, Hugo, Rimbaud, Jeanne d’Arc, the Revolution, Napoléon, etc.), Brel, Brassens, and Ferré popularise key founding elements of French culture. The three singers never hesitate to juxtapose, in their songs, poets, authors, and characters from different centuries: in Brassens’ *La guerre de 14-18*, for example, the ‘guerriers de Sparte’ are compared with ‘les grognards de Bonaparte’; in *Marquise*, he gives a voice to Tristan Bernard who wrote a reply to Corneille from his Marquise: ‘Peut-être que je serai vieille / Répond Marquise cependant / J’ai vingt-six ans mon vieux Corneille / Et je t’emmerde en attendant’; in Ferré’s *Mon général*, Ferré sings to De Gaulle, comparing him to Jeanne d’Arc: ‘C’est une femme qu’avait de la technique / Malgré sa fin peu catholique / Vous aviez les mêmes soucis’. By mixing centuries, juxtaposing mythological characters with historical ones, and traditional poets with modern ones (such as Prévert, Aragon or Apollinaire for example), Brel, Brassens, and Ferré create an impression of historical continuity between eras and genres. Their work, because of its heterogeneity, brings together periods that were divided by historical circumstances – notably pre-war and post-war France – and therefore contributes, to a certain extent, to the tradition of historical continuity that the Third Republic had encouraged.

The main reason that Pinet describes Brel, Brassens, and Ferré as ‘solidly Third Republic’, though, is that the trio radiates an aura of dynamic and constructive individualism, which once again has been a defining value of republican ideals. As Crubellier also observes in the study mentioned above, the Third Republic endeavoured to replace religious and moral education with civic and moral education: ‘On ne visait à rien moins qu’à briser la plupart des sociabilités traditionnelles au bénéfice d’un

individualisme bourgeois'.⁴⁸ As has been demonstrated in the previous chapter through the analysis of the singers' public profiles, Brel, Brassens, and Ferré each embody a certain form of individualism: Brel gave up everything to pursue his dreams of adventure, Brassens lived an almost secluded life, oblivious to social conventions, while Ferré spent his time either in remote villages, or on stage vehemently defending the rights of individuals against authorities and capitalism.

The singers represent three different and complementary conceptions of individualism, which balance each other out: Brel's and Brassens' lack of political definition of their individualistic ideals is compensated by Ferré's endless attempts at precisely defining his conception of individualism and anarchism, and Brassens' quiet individualism balances Ferré's vehement one. This system of 'complementarity' once again highlights the significance of Brel, Brassens, and Ferré forming a trio, and stresses Ferré's peculiar position within this trio. Ferré's songs were less widely known by the public than Brel's and Brassens'; but he benefited from the association with his two colleagues, since, despite his work being less famous, the 1969 interview secured him his position among the 'Grands' of *chanson* (that is from a *media* perspective – the fact that Ferré was a 'Grand' from an *artistic* perspective before the interview is not being discussed here). In return, Ferré brought to the trio an important superficial political substance: although he always denied that his work was political, Ferré handled political ideas and events, and therefore provided the trio with the possibility to *potentially* have a political significance. Although this potential political significance was too superficial to be exploited – none of the singers could have convincingly been a politician – it completed the credibility of the trio: the trio was not only about art and culture, it was also about the people, it was rooted in reality.

⁴⁸ Crubellier, p.157.

It is essential to note the *superficial* dimension of the trio's political significance, for if it were not superficial, it would be exploited and would almost certainly be disappointing. In fact, it seems that what makes the values symbolised by the trio so solid, is the fact that they are expressed through images or ideas – or *concepts*, to refer back to Barthes's terminology – that are never developed fully, and which, therefore, can be adapted, interpreted, and appropriated. And the fact that these concepts evolve between three poles makes them even more ephemeral, and consequently, even more flexible. The work and characters of Brel, Brassens, and Ferré radiate a strong sentiment of individualism and revolt, but these values can only be embraced and appropriated by the public because they are expressed and interpreted superficially. Chapter One observed that the individualistic values praised by the singers in their works testified to the influence of post-war cultural movements; this is certainly the case, but what a deeper analysis reveals is that this influence is superficial. The singers have assimilated many of the familiar currents of ideas of the time – such as individualism, pacifism, or anticlericalism – and process them in their songs, but without analysing them deeply, for they are not politicians or philosophers; in other words, they project illustrations of topical concepts – such as individualism – onto the audience in the form of short and rough tales.

However differently individualism is perceived in the three singers' works, it is, therefore, in all three cases, expressed through strong imagery. It is expressed through brief but graphic ideas or images that are instantly recognised by the audience, and with which the audience empathises – although without necessarily wanting to live by them. Such images can be demonstrations of anti-establishment attitudes, as in many of the trio's songs, or a photograph of Brel on his boat in the middle of the Atlantic. As has already been mentioned in Chapter One, examples of demonstrations of anti-

establishment feelings are plentiful in the trio's works: to name only some of the most famous occurrences, the 'gendarmes' are the target of Brassens' *Hécatombe*, the army is insulted in Brel's *Au suivant*, and the Church is heavily criticised in Ferré's *Monsieur Tout Blanc*. But as Christopher Pinet rightly observed, all of these anti-establishment ideas are expressed in a non-threatening way; in a very insightful article on Brassens, Astérix, and Cabu, he observed:

Though Brassens is antimilitarist, an antipatriot (see 'Les Patriotes') and a pacifist, he refuses to offer a leftist political solution or indeed any political solution to societal problems. [...] More important, however, is the fact that Brassens remained faithful to his nonconformist individualism and it is precisely this nonthreatening stance which made him so popular among the French in the postwar years.⁴⁹

Pinet here suggests that Brassens' popularity was due to the fact that he embodied anti-establishment values, but without actively advocating change. The same could be said, to some extent, of the three singers as a trio; of course, Ferré was more of a protester than Brel and Brassens, but his revolt was never an aspiration to revolution.

What Pinet explains and what this thesis is also arguing, is that although the three singers were perceived, by the public and the media, as revolutionary characters, the key ideas and ideologies of their works are undeniably traditional, and as the following section will argue, conservative. In the study mentioned above, Pinet wrote of Brassens and Goscinny that they

both proffer and reinforce values accepted and embraced by large numbers of Frenchmen. These values include individualism, the spirit of resistance, 'débrouillardise' and a large measure of 'je m'enfoutisme'. Insofar as they subscribed to such values, both Brassens and Goscinny served to conserve long-established myths that the French hold dear about themselves, myths which do not question the character of identity of most Frenchmen, but instead offer values which can be readily approved and accepted by all. Even when they appear to be critical or ironic remarks in the songs or books, they are always directed at 'les autres'.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Christopher Pinet, 'Astérix, Brassens, and Cabu: The ABC's of Popular Culture' in *Popular Traditions and Learned Cultures in France*, Marc Bertrand, ed., *Stanford French and Italian Studies*, vol. 35, 1985, p.281.

⁵⁰ Pinet 'Asterix, Brassens, and Cabu', p.276.

Once again, these remarks could equally apply to Brel and Ferré. Of course, this does not mean that the three singers' fame is illegitimate, for artistically, they were undeniably revolutionary and avant-garde; but on a purely ideological level, they were not as daring and scandalous as their public profiles suggest. Brassens did use rude words and sing 'Mort aux lois vive l'anarchie' (*Hécatombe*), but the same vocabulary and ideas had been used in popular song and literature for centuries. What was new, it is true, was that in the new era of the music industry, such words were broadcast and reached even those who did not want to hear them; they were no longer confined to the cabarets of the Rive Gauche. If the three singers, then, contributed to trivialising scandalous language and ideas, they were not themselves exceptionally scandalous artists. So although in the form, Brel, Brassens, and Ferré were avant-garde, in the content, they were very traditional. Through their anti-establishment songs and their individualist characters, they reinforced the national revolutionary tradition, but in a non-political and non-threatening way; and the view expressed in an article published in 1966 about Brassens could equally have been expressed about the trio Brel-Brassens-Ferré: 'Il est français jusqu'au bout de sa guitare. Ses chansons, c'est la France telle qu'elle fut, telle que toujours elle s'espère: frondeuse, généreuse, amoureuse, vigoureuse'.⁵¹

The trio Brel-Brassens-Ferré, then, symbolises non-conformist individualism and revolt against the authorities, but with conservative effects; in other words, they once again illustrate the interconnection that existed, in post-war society, between revolt and social order: for far from endangering social order, their songs and characters rally the population around national myths. In the same way as they illustrate the attractiveness of non-threatening revolt, they also testify, although possibly less

⁵¹ Danièle Heymann, 'Brassens repart en guerre', *L'Express*, 12-18 September 1966, pp.38-41.

obviously, to an artificially new conception of society, and in particular of gender relations in society.

b – They embody the conservative values of a patriarchal society

The question of gender relations has always been a crucial one in studies of Brel, Brassens, and Ferré. The three singers were regularly accused of misogyny, and journalists who interviewed them unfailingly broached the topic of their conception of women. Extracts of such interviews have been discussed in previous chapters, mainly to illustrate the singers' inconsistency in their discourses about women. Cristiani's 1969 interview was no exception to the rule: he asked them about women, and they replied with confusing and arbitrary statements; Brel's answer was: 'je suis relativement misogyne'.⁵² As the previous chapters have argued, this study focuses on the social significance and function of the trio Brel-Brassens-Ferré and is therefore interested in the public profiles of the singers; whether they were *actually* misogynists or not is consequently irrelevant from this perspective. The present analysis of their conceptions of women, then, only takes part in the debate about their misogyny in so far as it can provide an understanding of how they and their works are illustrative of a wider social attitude.

The three singers had a very paradoxical attitude towards gender relations: on the one hand, they had a non-conformist approach to relationships, since none of them believed in marriage and all praised the value of free love; on the other hand, even in songs deemed to be flattering towards women (such as Brassens' *La Non demande en mariage*, for example), their characters evolve in a deeply patriarchal society, in which

⁵² Cristiani and Leloir, p.65.

women are solely depicted in relation to men. This paradox, however, is not an unusual one, and is actually typical of any society still rooted in its old moral traditions while at the same time living through the sexual revolution of the 1960s. The trio's conception of gender relations cannot be said, therefore, to be illustrative exclusively of the attitude of French society – especially since Brel was not French and received a strict Belgian and catholic education. But as the first section of this chapter has argued, France, after the Second World War, reconstructed itself on very patriarchal grounds, and the fact that the trio is seen to embody Frenchness while its celebrity partly rests on the singers' 'manliness' and on their conception of society, makes it interesting to draw a parallel between *their* attitudes towards women and the attitude of French society in general.

As has already been mentioned above, Kristin Ross explained that post-war French society concentrated on its reconstruction through the control of the everyday, and that women, 'as the class of people most responsible for the complex movement whereby the social existence of human beings is produced and reproduced, *are* the everyday: its managers, its embodiment'.⁵³ Female characters in the songs of Brel, Brassens, and Ferré, only evolve within the limits of the 'everydayness' mentioned by Ross. Women are always depicted, in the songs, as characters subjected to a social function usually defined in relation to a man: women are wives, mothers, or lovers ('lovers' have a social connotation since they represent all the relationships that are not deemed socially acceptable – premarital relationships, adultery, sexual relations with prostitutes); and men – still in the songs – are always disappointed in women because they expect their relationships to take them away from reality and into an ideal world, but at the same time, they do not conceive of women outside the social functions that root them in the reality of everydayness.

⁵³ Ross, p.77.

In the works of Brel, Brassens, and Ferré, images of ‘mothers’, ‘wives’, ‘lovers’ or ‘prostitutes’ recur frequently as a way of examining how the State can exercise a guiding influence in the life of the individual. For the three singers, woman, through marriage and maternity, becomes an instrument with which society can institutionalise man’s life and, by thus ruling his feelings and sexuality, challenge his intimate self. The songs express the idea that the Church and the State, through marriage, regulate sexuality, repress love and therefore work against nature. In the trio’s work, transition from childhood to manhood is often marked by the discovery of sensuality and love. In Brel’s *Mon enfance*, the narrator sings: ‘Mon enfance passa / Ce fut l’adolescence / Et le mur du silence / Un matin se brisa / Ce fut la première fille’; in Brassens’ *La Chasse aux papillons*, two teenagers go for a walk ‘Ils ne savaient pas que sous les ombrages / Se cachait l’amour et son aiguillon’. However, man – for the singers – just at the point when he can appreciate the love and sensuality of a woman, of a lover, finds himself obliged by society to get married. ‘Lovers’ are very often contrasted with husbands and wives, because ‘husband’ and ‘wife’ are names given by society to a union with which it should not be concerned. What the singers criticise is the passivity of people who give up on the blooming of their own feelings and sensuality in order to comply with social conventions. As Brel sang in *Les Flamandes*: ‘Si elles dansent c’est parce qu’elles ont vingt ans / Et qu’à vingt ans il faut se fiancer / Se fiancer pour pouvoir se marier / Et se marier pour avoir des enfants’.

Marriage is perceived by the three singers to be a case of society policing the private self, and the author of this infraction is most of the time a woman; in their songs, women tend to be looking for husbands and fathers whereas men are usually looking for lovers. In *Les Jardins du casino*, Brel describes women going home alone after a party, ‘Sans ce jeune homme ou sans ce veuf / Qui devait lui offrir la litière où elles auraient

pondu leur oeuf'. Women are seen to be very aware of the expectations of society, and they play by its rules; this is why they are often cruel characters who happily cheat on their husbands: they have managed to dissociate 'social status' from 'love and flesh'. Women are perceived as socially destined to become wives and mothers, so although having children is something natural, it is seen, in the songs, as a corollary of marriage and is therefore something to be rejected: it is considered an obstacle to spontaneous love and to sexuality. All the songs in which love is true and successful insist on the fact that there has been no marriage and no children: in *La Chanson des vieux amants*, Brel insists on the couple's happiness 'dans cette chambre sans berceau'; Brassens, in *La Non-demande en mariage*, asks his partner not to marry him so that he can think about her 'en éternelle fiancée'. When the children do come, love vanishes instantly. In Brassens' *Je suis un voyou*, the narrator is jealous of the children who have stolen his lover: 'J'ai perdu la tramontane en perdant Margot / Qu'épousa contre son âme un triste bigot / Elle doit avoir à l'heure, à l'heure qu'il est / Deux ou trois marmots qui pleurent pour avoir leur lait / Mais moi j'ai tété leur mère longtemps avant eux'; in *L'Amour est mort*, Brel tells the story of a couple '[Qui] ne voient plus dans leurs enfants / Que les défauts que l'autre y laisse'.

Married life, regulated life, suffocates man and makes him forget the spontaneity of love. This is why the singers only approve of unions that are not conventional or institutionalised. This also explains why, in the songs, prostitutes are always sympathetic characters, even when they happen to be cruel to the narrator. Prostitutes, for the trio, are not only women who sell their bodies for money; the idea of 'prostitute' extends to all sexually liberated women who use their bodies when and how they want. Brel, Brassens, and Ferré, by calling so many women 'prostitutes', simply adopt the perspective of the foolish and disciplined bourgeois who categorises as 'prostitution'

any physical relationship which has not been previously blessed and authorised by the mayor.

The prostitute is the antithesis of the mother and wife because she is a woman who refuses the role which society expects her to play: she is sexually independent and her sexuality is dissociated from maternity. As has already been mentioned, for the three singers, the character of the prostitute does not really refer to social reality: she is simply a symbol of unrestrained sexuality and of rebellion against social regulations. She is therefore seductive, but also eventually destructive, for being a negation of the mother and wife, she is still judged and defined according to the criteria of society and therefore remains a construction of society. So while the wives and mothers repress man's feelings and sexuality, once he turns to the prostitute, his situation is only aggravated: for prostitutes do not need men sexually or sentimentally, and they do not even need them to validate their social status.

Man really seems to be trapped in a triangle of mother-wife-prostitute, and this is even more obvious as the frontiers between the wife and the prostitute can sometimes be quite blurred. In the songs of Brel, Brassens, and Ferré, wives often isolate their husbands by even denying them their sexual power. In *Grand-mère*, Brel tells the story of a strong old lady, 'une tramontane / Qui fume le havane / Et fait trembler la terre', while 'pendant ce temps-là / Grand-père court après la bonne'; but at the end of the song, Grand-père is crying, ashamed of having cheated on Grand-mère, while 'pendant ce temps-là / Grand-mère se tape la bonne'. In Brassens' songs, wives often denigrate their husbands as sexual partners, as, for example, the female character in *Concurrence déloyale*: 'A la fornication / Elle s'emmerde elle s'emmerde / Avec ostentation'. So the prostitute, or cruel and sexually liberated woman, symbolises the extreme solitude of man (physically, sentimentally and socially). The wife and mother had killed his

feelings and repressed his sensuality, and now the prostitute – or prostituted wife – leaves him alone, socially excluded.

Brel, Brassens, and Ferré were heterosexual males and most of the narrators of their songs have a heterosexual and male perspective on life. In such a perspective, woman is a complementary double of man as both a private and a social being. She is the potential lover, who induces love and awakens sensuality; she is also a ‘social’ partner: a wife and mother. She can therefore easily serve as a mirror for both the private and the public self of man, and indeed, most women in the songs of Brel, Brassens, and Ferré, are used to offer a negative portrait of man. The cruel woman, for example, is used to demonstrate the ridiculous weakness of man when confronted with love; similarly, the songs portraying naïve girls contribute to enhancing the fondness of men for the innocent and legitimate sin of the flesh. What matters, then, in the female characters of the trio’s songs, is usually more the effect that they have on man rather than their own intrinsic qualities. In Brassens’ songs for example, a ‘*femme*’ is very rarely just a ‘*femme*’, she is usually ‘somebody’s *femme*’: ‘la femme d’Hector’, ‘la femme du boucher’, ‘les femmes d’agents de police’. In Brel’s songs, female characters are only described in relation to a man, by the effect that they produce on a man. In Ferré’s work, women are almost exclusively present as erotic objects and as instruments of moral transgression. So although female characters are omnipresent in the songs, ‘women’ are arguably not discussed at all in the trio’s works: the central theme of their songs is actually ‘man’.

In his study *Penser avec Brel*, Laurent Bibard discusses the masculine/feminine dialectic in the work of Brel, and argues that the singer can only ever be disappointed in women, since he expects them to compensate for the failings of his own masculinity:

La dynamisation de l'œuvre du poète s'organise de la façon suivante: 1° manque de confiance originaire en le masculin de l'humain, en particulier au travers de l'image du père que se fait l'enfant Brel; 2° hypothèse consciente ou inconsciente que le féminin est le lieu et la dynamique du salut: il donne l'amour, l'esprit, la culture, la douceur, la tendresse de l'homme – par excellence ici, au sens *générique* du terme; 3° l'homme Brel découvre tôt ou tard 'qu'il y a des épines aux Rosa'; 4° il exprime et tend vers la recherche du paradis perdu que représente désormais non pas le féminin comme tel, mais *l'amour* même, ou la *rencontre*.⁵⁴

A similar pattern – although less obviously progressive – can be found in Ferré's work: women, in his songs, are either despicable characters or they recall a fantasised Eden. The fact that he sang so strongly against marriage whereas he got married three times and was very reliant on his wives, demonstrates that 'women' were different characters in his life and in his songs. Ferré, as did Brel and Brassens, struggled to reconcile the fantasised vision of women and relationships – as idealised by Aragon, for example, in his famous 'La femme est l'avenir de l'homme' – with the traditional social functions associated with women, social functions which were revived, as we have seen, in post-war France.

Whether the three singers were actually misogynists or not, then, probably depends on the meaning given to the word: they certainly did not dislike women in real life, but they definitely failed to free themselves from a traditional and very patriarchal way of thinking. The fact that the question of their conception of gender relations was a widely discussed one but never undermined their celebrity suggests that their position was not deemed outrageous or unusual at the time. Brel, Brassens, and Ferré perceived the world from a very male perspective, without really realising that in such a perspective, women could only be 'social' beings; in this respect, the trio is characteristic of post-war thought and testifies to a particularly male-dominated society.

⁵⁴ Laurent Bibard, *Penser avec Brel* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2006), p.30.

This chapter has argued that the paradoxical aspiration for both revolt and the status quo, which characterises post-war French society, could be used as a paradigm for the study of several aspects of post-war France, and that the popularity of the trio Brel-Brassens-Ferré rested precisely on the dynamic of such a paradox. In particular, what precedes has dealt with the ways in which the social values advocated and embodied by the trio are characteristic of a society that tries to reconcile its ambitions of modernisation and change with the need to rehabilitate its past and its traditions. The next section focuses on how the popularity of the trio is emblematic of a similar dualistic attitude, no longer towards the conception of social values, but towards the conception of the role and place of culture and art in society. As has already been discussed, the policies of the post-war period were particularly favourable to culture and its democratisation; in David Looseley's words: 'Post-war democratisation [of culture] was therefore not so much a political as an ethical and civic imperative aiming to transcend class struggle in favour of national consensus and individual self-fulfilment'.⁵⁵ The issue of the trio and the democratisation of culture will be discussed in the following section; but within the debate of the popularisation of culture was also the debate about its French authenticity: in an era of modernisation and globalisation, music was an increasingly accessible form of culture, and the trio Brel-Brassens-Ferré embodied the authentic Frenchness of culture in a world threatened by American imperialism.

c – Brel- Brassens-Ferré as a picture of 'True France'?

• **A symbol of Franco-French *chanson***

⁵⁵ David L. Looseley, *The Politics of Fun: Cultural Policy and Debate in Contemporary France* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 1995), p.22.

David Looseley, in his study of popular music, quotes the sociologist, Paul Yonnet, who expresses an intriguing theory about the nature of *chanson*; according to Yonnet, French *chanson* was completely hermetic and confined itself in a self-centred Jacobin tradition where high cultural form dominated: ‘1960s pop was a threat to *chanson* not because of American economic imperialism [...] but because of *chanson*’s imprisonment in an obsolete national hierarchy of aesthetic value, at a time when youth culture was open to the international’.⁵⁶ Yonnet’s position has of course to be qualified, notably because, despite their differences, *chanson* and American-type pop music have influenced each other: the relationship between the two genres has been a complex system of influences. However, the ‘hermetic’ dimension of *chanson* mentioned by Yonnet is interesting, since it illustrates the idea that what made *chanson* so French was the fact that it only appealed to (or addressed) a French or possibly, as will be discussed below, a Francophone audience.

As opposed to other types of music in which the lyrics are almost completely ‘invested by the music’ (to refer back to Zumthor’s analysis) *chanson* belongs more to the tradition of the fable and its lyrics are an essential part of it: anyone who does not understand French cannot understand a *chanson*. As discussed previously, the cultural references used in the songs, as well as the vocabulary and grammar, can be difficult to grasp for non-French speakers. The beauty of some of the lyrics emerges from turns of phrase which might be difficult to appreciate without a thorough knowledge of the language; this is the case, for example, in Brel’s *Le Plat pays*: ‘Avec la mer du Nord pour dernier terrain vague / Et des vagues de dunes pour arrêter les vagues / Et de vagues rochers que les marées dépassent’, or in Brassens’ *Hécatombe* ‘Or sous tous les

⁵⁶ Looseley, *Popular Music in Contemporary France*, p.38.

cieux sans vergogne / C'est un usage bien établi / Dès qu'il s'agit de rosser les cognes / Tout le monde se réconcilie / Ces furies perdant toute mesure / Se ruèrent sur les guignols / Et donnèrent je vous l'assure / Un spectacle assez croquignol'. Peter Hawkins, discussing the *chanson* genre, observes: 'It is scarcely surprising that such a style of popular music should remain unattractive to a foreign audience. It serves to create a sense of complicity amongst native French-speakers, who are likely to be the only audience in a position to understand the resonances'.⁵⁷ It is true that the cultural references of the trio's songs play an important part in the connection established between the singers and their audiences, and that these references are usually shared mainly by people with a French or Francophone background. Examples of such references are countless in Brassens' work: his song *La Route aux quatre chansons*, for instance, only makes sense to people who know the four popular songs mentioned; similarly, the lines 'Que le brave Prévert et ses escargots veuillent / Bien se passer de moi pour enterrer les feuilles' (*Le 22 septembre*) are a direct reference to Prévert's *Chanson des escargots qui vont à l'enterrement*, and not an obvious one to non-French people. Ferré's work also contains such references, whether literary and poetic or historical and political. In *Les Temps difficiles*, for example, the lines 'Ma femme veut jouer les présidents / Elle dit que c'est très plébixitant / Pour lui montrer que je suis un homme / Je dois lui dire par référendum' are an obvious criticism of De Gaulle, but once again, this might not have been explicit to people who did not live in France and did not, therefore, have to vote on an almost yearly basis. Brel made fewer French-centred references, but his song *Jaurès* is still an example of a song focused on a typically French subject.

⁵⁷ Peter Hawkins, *Chanson: The French Singer-Songwriter from Aristide Bruant to the Present Day* (Aldershot and Burlington, USA: Ashgate, 2000), p.61.

Resonances and language also play an important part in the humour of the songs. Although Ferré might not be remembered for making his audience laugh, humour was undeniably an essential factor in the popularity of both Brel and Brassens; and one of the prerequisites for the success of humour is a rapport between audience and singer which is mainly established through repeated allusions to familiar situations and stories that find an echo in the public, and through the feigned inferiority of the performer. The humorous dimension of the singers' works therefore belongs to a different logic from typical American productions on two levels: firstly, they do not lend themselves to international marketing, and secondly, the feigned mediocrity of the performer (which will be developed below) goes against the logic of the celebrity system. However, despite the fact that the three singers and the *chanson* they embody belong to a non-American logic, they do not belong to an anti-American one.

• **The trio and cultural democratisation: three self-made Parisians**

The first part of the present chapter has insisted on the importance, in post-war France, of policies popularising French culture; this final part will endeavour to demonstrate the ways in which the trio Brel-Brassens-Ferré embody France's attitude towards culture. The previous chapters have already discussed the fact that Brel, Brassens, and Ferré took poetry into the streets in several ways. Firstly, by setting to music the work of recognised literary figures, the singers provided many people who had never heard or read Baudelaire or Villon, for example, with the opportunity to become more familiar with such poetic works. Secondly, as the first three singers to become 'poètes d'aujourd'hui', they encouraged public debates, in the media, about the nature of poetry and about the nature of song; at a time when the influence of the music industry and of

the audiovisual media rocketed, they provoked debates on the possibility of some oral genres gaining the same respect and authority as written genres. The three singers brought literature into a popular genre, and thereby contributed to legitimising this popular genre. Hawkins, discussing the work of Brassens and Ferré, observed:

They both deliberately associate their work with poetry, with a form of expression which foregrounds the French language, and exhibits a highly specialised and sophisticated use of that medium. There are two very particular aspects to this poetic ambition in the broader context of French culture: the first is the social prestige attached to literature in French society, and the second is the social status associated with a mastery of the French language.⁵⁸

Brel, Brassens, and Ferré illustrate an important aspect of the democratisation of culture, which Pascal Ory, in his study of culture in post-war France, has called a ‘respectabilisation’ of so-called minor genres and arts. He explained that between 1945 and 1975, these genres became more widely respected: ‘Rien de plus logique dans une société économiste, et rien de plus prévisible dès lors qu’à ce facteur s’ajoute celui, plus proprement politique, de la démocratie: comment soutenir plus longtemps que les arts qui ont la faveur du plus large public seraient dépourvus de toute qualité intrinsèque?’⁵⁹ And the trio, through the singers’ personae, their humour, and the fact that they set to music recognised literary figures, contributes to the ‘respectabilisation’ of the *chanson* genre, and illustrates the success and the qualities of popular genres.

The challenge that the three singers faced was therefore to be representatives of ‘the popular’, while at the same time being able to master the French language and its literature as intellectuals. The introductory section of this chapter discussed the success of Brel, Brassens, and Ferré, and argued that key factors in their popularity were: firstly, the ability of their personae to impersonate ‘bad guys’; secondly, the assurance that they were actually ‘nice guys’; and thirdly, their ability to appear ‘mediocre’, mainly by being ‘maladjusted’ to their profession and by telling banal or familiar stories. In the

⁵⁸ Hawkins, p.59.

⁵⁹ Pascal Ory, *L’Aventure culturelle française 1945-1989* (Paris: Flammarion, 1989), pp.65-66.

light of this chapter's discussion of the popularisation of culture, the list of key factors in the singers' success should be slightly modified: as well as having a 'mediocre' side to them – mainly needed to assert their authenticity – the singers must also have an intellectual side. In other words, they have to be simultaneously representatives of the popular and of the intelligentsia. This, of course, requires some degree of cultural hypocrisy, for the singers are expected to legitimise popular culture by intellectualising it, by looking at it from an intellectual's perspective. Such an attitude towards a popular genre like *chanson*, is comparable with the attitude identified by Lebovics in relation to colonial culture:

But as we have seen, it was above all an important early exercise in twentieth-century ontology: an effort to promote a French identity as a colonial people, a people whose genius lay in assimilating peoples so that they both kept their *petit pays* and yet partook of the universal identity of a French-defined and French-administered humanity.⁶⁰

Lebovics, in his study, greatly insists on France's efforts, in the twentieth century, to reconcile the identities of the '*petit-pays*' and of '*Grande France*'. His analysis of the tensions between these different identities mainly revolves around the issue of the relation between France and its colonies. Colonialism and post-colonialism are very important identity issues of post-war France, but are virtually absent from the work of Breil, Brassens, and Ferré. There are a few allusions, in some of their songs, to colonial and post-colonial issues: Ferré often criticised the war in Algeria, and Breil made fun of people who demonstrated against the Vietnam war just because it was a fashionable thing to do; but nothing in the singers' songs or characters can be said to illustrate the attitude of French society towards colonial issues. Such an absence could be interpreted in many different ways, but discussing such interpretations does not fall within the scope of the present study. However, the tension '*petit-pays*'/'*Grande France*',

⁶⁰ Lebovics, p.93.

mentioned by Lebovics, is relevant to the trio Brel-Brassens-Ferré if considered from the perspective of the relation between Paris, the *Provinces*, and Belgium.

As discussed in Chapter Three, through the analysis of the public profiles of Brel, Brassens, and Ferré, a significant part of the singers' popularity rested on the fact that the public perceived them to be 'authentic'. The authenticity which emanated from them was due to several factors: their physical involvement in their work and with the public, the lack of pretension in their performances, and their physical and professional 'maladjustment' to the new requirements of the emerging music industry. Their modest backgrounds (mainly in Brassens' case) and the fact that they had to endure lean times before becoming successful, also contributed to their authenticity. Another essential aspect of their backgrounds that added to their authentic portrayals was that the three of them were *Provinciaux*: they were brought up in the *Province*, moved to Paris driven by artistic aspirations, and fought to conquer the capital. Brassens came up from Sète; Ferré was born and brought up in Monaco, and had Italian connections (his mother was of Italian origin, he went to school in Italy, and he moved to Italy permanently after his third wedding); and Brel came from the Belgian region of Flanders. Of course, Belgium is not the French *Province*, and neither are Monaco and Italy; and unlike Ferré who was actually a French citizen, Brel had no French connection. What is interesting, however, is that the three singers were treated equally, in the media, as representatives of the French *Provinces*.

Marc Quaghebeur, in an article entitled 'L'identité ne se réduit pas à la langue', analyses how France, through the centuries, managed to establish an equivalence – although an illegitimate one – between the French language and the idea of 'France', thereby forcing other French-speaking countries into defining their own identity around

that idea of ‘France’.⁶¹ Quaghebeur retraces the history of the French language, insisting on the gradual tightening of the link between ‘écriture et pouvoir’ in France. He explains, for example, that the establishment of the Académie Française reinforced the French (and Parisian) monopoly over the language: l’Académie Française ‘lie, de façon massive, la dignité de la langue française à ses traces écrites. Or ces dernières [sont] largement contrôlées par le monde parisien’(p.65). He also observed:

Ces moules lettrés furent d’autant mieux intériorisés comme modèle par les classes montantes de la bourgeoisie française ou non, que la France était, à l’heure de la “stabilisation” de la langue écrite, la première puissance du temps. [...] Pour les francophones non français qui s’identifient à ce modèle, en découle, aujourd’hui encore, une évidente autocensure: celle de l’expression véritablement autonome de leurs singularités. [...] Ne redoutent-ils pas d’apparaître comme de maladroits provinciaux? (pp.65-66)

Brel, truly illustrates this attitude, for to the French media, being Belgian only seemed to add some *provincial* local colour to his character, in the same way as Languedoc and Monaco did for Brassens and Ferré: what counted for the media was that the three singers came from outside Paris. Even though Brel came from Brussels, which is a significantly bigger city than Sète, for the media and thereby for the public, the journeys of Ferré, Brassens, and Brel were comparable: they had required them to leave their hometowns to come to the only place where they could succeed as artists: Paris. Before Brel managed to make a name for himself in Paris, his songs received fierce criticism, and he was famously reminded of his non-Parisian status: Marc Robine observed that at the time, people did not fail ‘de signaler à ce “*pauvre Brel*” qu’il “*existe d’excellents trains pour Bruxelles*”’,⁶² as if Brussels was – like the French *Province*, and as opposed to Paris – culturally backward.

⁶¹ Marc Quaghebeur, ‘L’identité ne se réduit pas à la langue’, in Paul Gorceix, ed., *L’Identité culturelle de la Belgique et de la Suisse francophones*, actes du colloque international de Soleure (juin 1993) (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1997), pp.59-105.

⁶² *Chorus: les cahiers de la chanson n°25: Spécial Jacques Brel* (Brézolles: Les Éditions du Verbe, Autumn 1998), p.74.

It seems, from the media, that the singers' success is all the more admirable as they had to conquer Paris; this is obvious from the almost condescending sympathy with which the *provincial* backgrounds of the singers are usually mentioned in the media: behind the descriptions of the picturesque characteristics of the *Province* often transpires the idea that it lacks sophistication. The fact that the singers were originally *Provinciaux*, instead of being considered as mere biographical information, is usually used to support descriptions of their unfamiliarity with the artistic sphere, and their connections with Belgium or the south of France are often associated with what Chapters Two and Three called the 'rough' dimension of their art, with their unpolished voices and with their slight awkwardness on stage. Brassens, for example, was described in an article as a 'fils du Languedoc' and 'un garçon simple, presque fruste d'apparence, suant le trac à larges gouttes orageuses, tirant après soi sa guitare lors de son entrée malhabile en scène comme un apprenti bûcheron sa cognée à l'orée d'un premier bois'.⁶³ Brel was described thus in *Le Monde*, after a triumphal performance at the Olympia music-hall: 'Jacques Brel s'inclinait, la sueur au front, aux lèvres, le sourire étonné et tranquille d'un enfant du plat pays'.⁶⁴

The three singers have in common that they do not belong in Paris but that Paris has made them, and their identity is therefore dual: they are Parisians and *Provinciaux*. By bringing the local colour of the *Province* to Paris, they satisfy the post-war attraction to regional and rural culture while at the same time confirming that the national culture was focused almost exclusively on Paris. The singers' dual identity is omnipresent in their works, and they regularly discussed their ambiguous relationship with Paris and their place of origin in interviews. Brel, for example, asserted on the national news in

⁶³ Henri Magnan, 'Aux Trois Baudets Georges Brassens Troubadour gaillard', *Le Monde*, 2 October 1952.

⁶⁴ Claude Sarraute, *Le Monde*, 17 October 1964.

1963 that he was a ‘fils des Flandres’;⁶⁵ his songs *Le Plat Pays*, *Les Flamandes*, *Les Flamingants*, and *Mon père disait*, testify to his ambiguous relationship with his native Belgium, while songs like *Au printemps* and *Les Prénoms de Paris* illustrate his attachment to the French capital. Sète and Paris were also two important themes for Brassens, in his work and in his life, as were Italy and Paris for Ferré.

The three singers, then, left their respective ‘Provinces’ to come up to Paris, succeeded there, and then left the city, overwhelmed by it. Brel left to go sailing around the world and settled in the Marquesas Islands, Ferré retired to a small village in Tuscany, and Brassens, although he remained physically in Paris, resented going out in public when he was in the capital and withdrew into privacy, only going out when he was out of Paris, in Brittany or in Sète. The trio, therefore, is a good illustration of both a will to see the *Province* flourish and produce outstanding artists and intellectuals, and a reluctance to lose Paris as a cultural centre. Brel, Brassens, and Ferré, in other words, are a perfect example of a cultural democratisation that does not undermine Paris and its elitist position: they gave a regional accent to their Parisian experiences, and then, as they had to leave Paris to escape the pressure of their careers, reasserted the French capital’s cultural centrality.

This final chapter has argued that the trio Brel-Brassens-Ferré, because of the values associated with it, can be perceived as an ideal representation of Frenchness. Like the concept of ‘Frenchness’, the trio is an indefinable, flexible, and adaptable entity. Because it is a media construction onto which society has projected many of its cultural debates and identity conflicts, the singers and their work can easily find an echo in post-war society. This chapter has insisted on the fact that because of the

⁶⁵ INA, Journal Télévisé 20 heures, Channel 1, 24 February 1963.

complementarity between the three singers, the trio has provided society with a space in which to express its paradoxes and contradictions. It has been argued that the conflict between revolt and status quo was one of the underpinning conflicts of modern French identity, and that, in the post-war context, it was characterised by a will to both look back to the past and move forward to the future; the trio Brel-Brassens-Ferré, because of the values expressed by their works and their public profiles, were the ideal representation of this traditionalist non-conformism.

Song is often considered to be the barometer of a period, for if it sells, if it is consumed, it means that it finds an echo in the population; and once we have understood the predominance of the contradictory aspirations changing/not changing, revolt/status quo, in the French mindset, it is no longer surprising that humour, derision, and the praise of ‘maladjustment’ and mediocrity are so present in the trio’s work, and in *chanson* in general. If the present analysis of the *chanson* represented by Brel, Brassens, and Ferré, can seem unflattering – since it could be thought to only encourage people to be satisfied with their own dishonesty and passivity – its intention is on the contrary to defend that *chanson*; for whatever the origins and the deep motivations of the conflict between revolt and the status quo that animates the French mentality, it cannot be fed or solved through *chanson*; *chanson* is only a popular interpretation of this conflict, and the trio Brel-Brassens-Ferré an illustrative example of its implications.

Conclusion

Through analysis of the systematic association of Brel, Brassens, and Ferré, this thesis has demonstrated that the trio of singers has a significance beyond the musical world, and that to fully understand the impact that it has had on post-war French society, it is necessary to consider it as a societal myth. Using Barthes's theories of the mythical concept, this study has explained how society creates popular myths, the deciphering of which provides a valuable insight into how a people perceives its own cultural identity; this thesis has endeavoured, therefore, to deconstruct and decipher the myth 'Brel-Brassens-Ferré' with a view to shedding light on the image of post-war French society that it reflects.

As Chapter One argued, the trio Brel-Brassens-Ferré has been taken for granted since its creation, and yet, no convincing argument has been found to justify the singers' systematic association. The singers' works shared a common cultural legacy, and were influenced by the same intellectual and artistic movements; but this legacy and these movements played an important part in the careers and celebrity of other singer-songwriters of the time and cannot, therefore, be considered a decisive factor in the genesis of the trio. One of the main arguments of this study has been that the trio Brel-Brassens-Ferré is a media construction that has crystallised key aspects of post-war *chanson*, and more generally, of post-war society. François-René Cristiani's interview with the singers, on 6 January 1969, and Jean-Pierre Leloir's photographs of the meeting, have had a major influence on the celebrity of the singers as a trio; as was argued in Chapter One, the photograph established in the public's mind an image of Brel, Brassens, and Ferré getting on well, enjoying life, looking 'manly' and unpretentious, and involved in an 'intellectual' conversation. Although, as was also

observed, it is impossible to have a precise idea of the actual impact that the photograph has had on society over the years, the fact that it is still widely available in shops and can be bought as a postcard in most Parisian newsagents suggests that it does capture the essence (however undefined) of what the singers have meant to French society.

One of the conclusions that can be drawn from this observation is that the celebrity of the three singers as a trio owes a lot to the subjectivity with which the public interpreted the images and narratives that the media offered them. At a time when the media's power was starting to assert itself, Brel, Brassens, and Ferré were appropriated by society and were loaded with meanings that transcended their professions and the musical world. The trio is therefore a significant example of the power of the media (newspapers, audiovisual media, and photography) to shape and colour public perception, and also of its power to create what might be termed 'manipulated' and 'artificial' symbols that articulate the values and issues that strike a chord with the public. In the specific case of the present study, the trio illustrates the link that unites the typically French genre which is '*chanson*' with the undefined notion which is 'French authenticity'.

Chapters Two and Three have demonstrated that many factors were involved in the mythicisation of the trio: the singers' talent and 'poetic' dimension, the subjectivity of the audience, the media, and the socioeconomic circumstances. The works of Brel, Brassens and Ferré have stimulated debates about the nature of poetry and the validity of considering a song as a poem. This was particularly the case when Ferré set established poets to music and when Brassens received the Grand Prix de Poésie de l'Académie Française. Chapter Two has contributed to these debates by questioning the distinction poetry/song and by supporting instead the distinction between oral and written poetry, mainly through the investigation of the specific nature of orality as

developed, notably, by Paul Zumthor. This study of orality has proven particularly fruitful, since it has established a clear link between the singers' aesthetic dimension and their social function. It has, in other words, demonstrated that the work of Brel, Brassens, and Ferré partly drew its significance from the social context from which it emerged.

The careers of Brel, Brassens, and Ferré developed in a period of transition in the music industry: they were brought up and trained in the era of the cabaret tradition, but rose to fame during the booming of the music hall and the star system. This, of course, had a strong influence on the singers' 'orality', since the media, the radio, records, huge concert halls, and powerful microphones, greatly modified the traditional contact and interaction between performer and audience – notably by increasing the public's control over the artist. It is in such a context that the trio embodied 'authenticity': their 'maladjustment' to the star-system, discussed in detail throughout the thesis, was an effective – although unintentional – way of seducing the audience by introducing tradition into modernity. As Barthes insists in *Mythologies*, a myth is historical, and the myth 'Brel-Brassens-Ferré' is no exception to the rule. As David Looseley observes: 'One might justifiably conclude, then, that while Brel, Ferré and Brassens are unquestionably the Olympians of post-war *chanson*, it is principally a committed critical discourse which guards the flame, servicing their memory as evidence that Gods once walked the earth and that *chanson* can be art'.¹

If the myth of the trio is historical and maintained, as Looseley argues, by 'a committed critical discourse', the question of the three singers' legacy for the twenty first century is an interesting one. An article published in 1953, commenting on singer-songwriters of the period, asked: 'Mais où sont leurs griffes d'antan?',² thereby

¹ David Looseley, *Popular Music in Contemporary France* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2003), p.83.

² 'Les chansonniers amorcent leur offensive d'hiver', *Le Monde*, 5 March 1953.

suggesting that singers of the 1950s had lost some of their verve and become more passive, which is a similar criticism to the one made by twenty-first-century journalists regarding contemporary singers. This suggests that what the public expects from singers constantly evolves over time, and that contemporary singer-songwriters cannot embody the same ideologies in the same way as previous singers did. Brel, Brassens, and Ferré embodied ‘authenticity’, for example, partly because of their ‘maladjustment’ to the requirements of the music industry; but their maladjustment was credible, since they originated from the cabaret tradition. Twenty-first century singers, on the other hand, cannot pretend to ignore the functioning of the music industry and the star system: their maladjustment, therefore, is necessarily feigned and acted, as the performances of singers like Bénabar or Vincent Delerm, for example, testify. It could be argued, therefore, that the main legacy that the trio Brel-Brassens-Ferré left to their successors is to have established the *principles* of ‘authentic French *chanson*’.

The introductory section of Chapter Four argued that there was a recurrent pattern within the elements contributing to the singers’ success: it was observed that in the work of all three singers, the themes of ‘revolt’, ‘poetry’, and ‘authenticity’, were articulated around an artist’s persona pretending to be a ‘bad guy’, an artist who actually proved to be a ‘nice’ and romantic ‘guy’, and who was ‘maladjusted’ and told familiar stories. This pattern, this mechanism of successful *chanson*, is still at work today in the works of contemporary singer-songwriters. In an article published in 2004 in *Le Figaroscope*, Annie Grandjanin and Stéphane Koechlin argue that the twenty-first century has witnessed a resurgence of ‘*chanson à texte*’ (although it seems that the qualifier ‘*chanson à histoire*’ would be more appropriate). Commenting on the success of Bénabar, Calogero, Carla Bruni, M., Corneille, and Tété, they observe:

Un rajeunissement et un véritable engouement qui marquent bien ce que l’on peut d’ores et déjà appeler un nouvel âge d’or des auteurs, compositeurs, interprètes, à

l'instar de celui de la décennie 1950-1960 qui vit les débuts de Barbara, Brassens, Brel, Aznavour, Ferré, Bécaud, Béart, Gainsbourg. [...] Après un premier virage amorcé dans les années 90 et la chanson minimaliste de Dominique A, Mathieu Boggaerts, Thomas Fersen, Arthur H, Miossec ou Mano Solo, les textes sont à nouveau à l'honneur.³

Although the popularity, throughout the 1970s and 1980s, of singers like Renaud and Nougaro – to name but two – testifies to the fact that 'la chanson à histoire' remained mainstream, it is undeniable that the start of the twenty-first century was characterised by the revelation of a whole new wave of *chanson* authors, like Bruni, Delerm, Calogero, Bénabar, or M. And it might not be insignificant that this period coincides with a renewal of interest in the mythical trio Brel-Brassens-Ferré. In 1997, *Chorus* magazine published, for the first time, the full transcription of the 'rencontre historique'.⁴ As was mentioned in Chapter One, in 2003, a prestigious edition of the interview was published, with previously unpublished photographs of the meeting, and in May 2008, the interview was staged as a play by the Comédie Française. Besides, as was also observed in Chapter One, from 2002 onwards, *Chorus* magazine started to conduct interviews of singers based on the same format as the 1969 interview.

All this suggests that the myth Brel-Brassens-Ferré, although it is a construction of post-war society, is adaptable, and has redefined itself to find a new relevance. The trio Brel-Brassens-Ferré, then, is potentially a myth of Frenchness in several ways. As Chapter Four argued, in the post-war context, the trio, with all the different values and ideals that it embodied, represented a convenient crystallisation of a society's wounded identity and cultural aspirations. The mythicisation of the trio, in this context, was a promise that reconciliation with such a wounded identity was possible.

³ Annie Grandjanin and Stéphane Koechlin, 'La chanson française dans le texte', *Le Figaroscope*, 11-17 February 2004, p.4.

⁴ *Chorus: les cahiers de la chanson n°20: Brel-Brassens-Ferré, La Rencontre Historique* (Brézolles: Les Éditions du Verbe, Été1997).

The trio remains a national myth today, but its connotations are different from what they were in the post-war period. It still embodies ‘poetry’, ‘revolt’, and ‘authenticity’, but since the historical context has evolved, these notions do not have the same social impact and implications as in the 1950s and 1960s. In a way, it seems that the trio Brel-Brassens-Ferré can serve as a reminder, in a society increasingly mediated, of the potential power and social significance of orality. Singers, in the eyes of the public, are always simultaneously themselves and their personae. Contrary to actors, they never expressly play a part; consequently, they are in a constant dialogue with the public, both as private and social (or public) individuals. Today, then, the trio Brel-Brassens-Ferré can be interpreted as a symbol of the social function of *chanson*: the trio embodies poetry, revolt, and authenticity; in other words, it embodies the fact that *chanson* establishes a dialogue between individuals, and art, society and identity. David Looseley, as was mentioned in the introduction, described Brel, Brassens, and Ferré as ‘a benchmark [...] against which other French artists must be measured’;⁵ but it might be legitimate to go further and add that they also constitute a landmark in the rediscovery of the social power of orality, and underline the growing significance of oral genres in a society increasingly dominated by the media.

⁵ Looseley, *Popular Music in Contemporary France*, p.68.

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I have chosen to organise these articles chronologically for two reasons: firstly, because the names of the authors were not always mentioned, and secondly because such an organisation seemed more relevant within the perspective of the study of the evolution of the singers' media profiles.

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