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POETIC *BRICOLAGES*. INVENTION, INTERVENTION, *POIESIS*

Abstract

What happens to the notion of *poiesis* in the 21st century? In this essay, I argue that a strand in contemporary poetics conceives poetry as a form of *bricolage*, highlighting its transformative nature. This conception is not a radical departure from the etymology of *poiesis*, making or creating, but shifts the focus from creation to fabrication, from invention to intervention. The notion of *bricolage* finds its conceptual roots in the works of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Jacques Derrida, and has been translated in French contemporary poetics as «poetic documents» or «poetic *dispositifs*». In such works, poets highlight saliences that they find in the original material to transform it into something poetic; they rearrange pre-existing texts to produce a new discourse. Building on my reading of Frank Smith *Syrie, l'invention de la guerre*, I show how poetic *bricolages* create a space of generation of significance, which is not only poetic, but also political as this space is the place where poetry encounters the everyday.

Keywords: Bricolage; Contemporary Poetry; Poetics.

Bricolagens poéticas. Invenção, intervenção, poiesis

Resumo

O que acontece à noção de *poiesis* no século XXI? Neste ensaio, argumento que uma vertente da poética contemporânea concebe a poesia como uma forma de *bricolage*,

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salientando a sua natureza transformadora. Esta concepção não é um afastamento radical da etimologia de *poiesis*, fazer ou criar, mas muda o foco da criação para a fabricação, da invenção para a intervenção. A noção de *bricolage* tem as suas raízes conceptuais nos trabalhos de Claude Lévi-Strauss e Jaques Derrida, e foi traduzida para a poética francesa contemporânea como «documentos poéticos» ou «dispositivos poéticos». Nestes trabalhos, os poetas sublinham saliências que encontram no material original para o transformarem em algo ético; re-arranjam textos pré-existentes para produzir um novo discurso. A partir da minha leitura de *Syrie, l'invention de la guerre* de Frank Smith, mostro como os bricolages poéticos criam um espaço de geração de significado, que não é só poético, mas também político já que este espaço é o lugar onde a poesia encontra o dia-a-dia.

Palavras-chave: Bricolage; Poesia Contemporânea; Poética.

What happens to the notion of *poiesis* in the 21st century? In this essay, I argue that a strand in contemporary poetics conceives poetry as a form of *bricolage*, highlighting its transformative nature. This conception is not a radical departure from the etymology of *poiesis*, making or creating, but shifts the focus from creation to fabrication, from invention to intervention. In contemporary French literary theory, poetic *bricolages* have been described as «poetic documents»² or «poetic *dispositifs*»³ because they rearrange pre-existing texts to produce a new discourse. This notion of *bricolage* originates in Claude Lévi-Strauss's opposition between the work of the *bricoleur* (handyman or handywoman) and that of the engineer, a distinction that Jacques Derrida challenges by considering that some kind of *bricolage* is always operating in our dealings with the world⁴. Pursuing this line of investigation, I explore the poetics of *bricolage* in the 21st century to emphasise the transformative dimension of *poiesis*. In such works, poets highlight saliences that they find in the original material to transform it into something poetic. As I will argue, poetic *bricolages* create a space of generation of significance, which is not only poetic, but also political as this space is the place where poetry encounters the everyday.

In the first part of this essay, I investigate the relations between *bricolage* and invention, to show how some contemporary poetic practices can be described as *bricolages*. In the second part, I explore what these poetic *bricolages* do, namely creating a space in which hidden aspects of the world are made visible and silenced voices can be heard. In the third and final part, I focus on Frank Smith *Syrie, l'invention de la guerre* to show the political dimension of poetic *bricolages*.

1. The Invention of *Bricolage*

In an interview with Martine Reid, Michel Butor considers himself to be «a *bricoleur* only metaphorically»⁵. This metaphorical level—in opposition to the everyday practical level of the notion—is, Butor continues, «the invention of

² F. Leibovici, *des documents poétiques*, Al Dante//Questions théoriques, Marseille 2007; F. Leibovici, *Des opérations d'écriture qui ne disent pas leur nom*, Questions théoriques, Paris 2020.

³ Ch. Hanna, *Poésie action directe* Al Dante, Romainville 2003; Ch. Hanna, *Nos dispositifs poétiques*, Questions théoriques, Paris 2010.

⁴ Cl. Lévi-Strauss, *La pensée sauvage*, Plon, Paris 1962; J. Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence*, Seuil, Paris 1967.

⁵ M. Butor, «Bricolage: An Interview With Michel Butor», trans. Noah Guynn, *Yale French Studies*, n° 84 (1994): p. 26, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2930177>.

material. This is what I would like to call the gathering of significant objects, the recovery of what has been eliminated, thrown out»⁶. In other words, the process of *bricolage* is the discovery of the significance of elements that had been thrown out. In this process, *bricolage* gives value to something that has apparently none. This metaphorical level of *bricolage* describes Butor's literary work: it is his task as a writer to find and gather material of various origins to put them together in a significant manner. He is a *bricoleur* of words who aims at generating significance and value. In contemporary poetry, this value lies in the capacity to breach the social order through language, as Abigail Lang argues:

Because the limits of language draw a limit to experience, it is up to poetry to open breaches in the social order: either by decontextualizing/recontextualizing the watchwords to make them appear as such, or by intensifying the experience of reading. The value of poetry lies in this singular experience, which is worthless in the eyes of the market because it is nontransferable and cannot be generalized⁷.

There is an opposition between the value of poetry *qua* revealing or intensifying force and the exchange value of poetry on the capitalist market. Franco Berardi argues something similar in his book on poetry and finance: «Poetry is language's excess: poetry is what in language cannot be reduced to information, and is not exchangeable, but gives way to a new common ground of understanding, of shared meaning: the creation of a new world»⁸. The irreducibility of poetry makes it valueless for the market, but its value lies in its capacity to create a new world. How does this creation occur?

Whereas Butor considers *bricolage* as a metaphor, it has become, according to Christopher Johnson, a general concept applicable to many fields of study⁹. The origin of this concept is to be found in Lévi-Strauss's distinction between the *bricoleur* and the engineer in *La Pensée sauvage*: the engineer has a project and uses its resources to realise it while the *bricoleur* plays with the various elements in their hands until they can make something out of them¹⁰. The *bricoleur* is thus the «savage mind» who uses whatever material they have at their disposal to invent or fabricate something, whereas the engineer is the «scientific mind» who plans in advance what they need to complete their project. For Lévi-Strauss, mythological thought operates on the grounds of *bricolage*, and we could relate this «savage mind» to poetry and the arts, insofar as they are opposed to the «scientific mind».

However, Derrida elaborates on this notion and questions Lévi-Strauss's distinction by relating it to the idea of play. For him, the engineer is a myth and there are only *bricoleurs*: «If one calls *bricolage* the necessity of borrowing one's concepts

⁶ Butor, art. cit., p. 26.

⁷ A. Lang, «Bail Out Poetry», *Boundary 2* 48 (2021): p. 133.

⁸ F. Berardi, *The uprising: on poetry and finance*, Semiotext(e), Los Angeles 2012, p. 147.

⁹ Ch. Johnson, «Bricoleur and Bricolage: From Metaphor to Universal Concept», *Paragraph* 35, n° 3 (2012): pp. 355-72.

¹⁰ Lévi-Strauss, *La pensée sauvage*, op. cit., pp. 30-36.

from the text of a heritage which is more or less coherent or ruined, it must be said that every discourse is *bricoleur*¹¹. Following Derrida, if every discourse is a *bricolage*, we can understand poetry as a specific kind of *bricolage* with language, one in which play is of central significance. This play is what allows the *bricoleur* to create and invent something new¹². The inventive and innovative dimension of *bricolage* is what makes it a notion relevant to poetics¹³.

As Anne Mélice argues: «Bricolage leaves space for innovation, but invention is based on a preexisting structure. Invention must not be confused with the spontaneity of the engineer's project. It remains bound to an inheritance that it either accepts or rejects, and that prevents it, unlike the project that defines the engineer, from being recognised as an original creation»¹⁴. Mélice points out that invention through *bricolage* occurs only on a preexisting background. Invention is thus not a creation *ex nihilo* but a fabrication with whatever is ready at hand. In contrast to the engineer—and even though we have seen with Derrida that the engineer is an ideal concept that never exists—the *bricoleur* inherits from a tradition with which they dialogue. We can see how this conception of *bricolage* is powerful to conceptualise poetic and artistic inventions: they inherit from a tradition (forms, subjects, contexts, etc.) and react to it, often by rejecting it at least in part.

In contemporary poetic theory, Christophe Hanna uses this notion of *bricolage* to describe poetic *dispositifs*: «Let us observe at first that the notion of *bricolage* places the emphasis less on mechanisms of historical subjectivation and domination than on traditional and collective processes destined to respond locally to punctual needs»¹⁵. Against the notion of *dispositif* that has a strategic dimension (following Michel Foucault), the notion of *bricolage* insists on specific needs¹⁶. Poetic documents, of which we will explore examples in the next sections, are kinds of *dispositifs* that reveal this dimension of *bricolage* by explicitly working with pre-existing linguistic elements¹⁷.

¹¹ J. Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass, Routledge, London 2001, p. 360.

¹² In *Playing and Reality*, D. W. Winnicott relates culture to the nurturing of the child's play. This continuity between creative play and culture thus highlights how a *bricolage* is a form of play, and how the child's *bricolage* relates to a poetic one, see D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, Routledge, London 2005 [1971].

¹³ Rob Hope presents creativity as a form of recycling rather than a creation *ex nihilo*. We can thus understand *bricolage* as a creative endeavour that connects to poetic (*qua* creative) practices. See R. Hope, *Creativity. Theory, History, Practice*, Routledge, London 2005.

¹⁴ A. Mélice, «Un concept lévi-straussien déconstruit: le «bricolage», *Les temps modernes* 64, n° 656 (2009): p. 91. My translation: «Le bricolage fait droit à l'innovation; mais c'est sur le fond d'une structure préexistante que procède l'invention. Celle-ci ne se confond pas avec la spontanéité du projet de l'ingénieur. Elle reste prise dans un héritage qu'elle accepte, ou qu'elle refuse, et qui interdit de lui reconnaître, à la différence du projet qui définit l'ingénieur, le caractère originaire d'une création.»

¹⁵ Hanna, *Nos dispositifs poétiques*, op. cit., p. 174. My translation: «Observons d'abord que la notion de *bricolage* met moins l'accent sur des mécanismes de subjectivation et de domination historiques que sur des procédures traditionnelles et collectives destinées à répondre localement à des besoins ponctuels.»

¹⁶ The vocabulary of *dispositif* adds a supplementary layer of interpretation by connecting poetry to Michel Foucault's reflections on power structures and their *dispositif*, as he describes them in *Discipline and Punish* for instance. For Foucault, a *dispositif* consists in «strategies of relations of forces supporting, and supported by, types of knowledge» (M. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge. Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-77*, Pantheon Books, New York 1980, p. 196).

¹⁷ More broadly speaking, such poetic *bricolages* can be related to other forms of so-called «uncreative writing.»

The poetic document *qua bricolage* therefore leaves the domain of poetic creation to insist on a more pragmatic dimension according to which poets generate significance and value from pre-existing documents. If, following Derrida, everything is *bricolage* insofar as everything comes from an inheritance and that the notion of origin is problematic, poets can be seen as lyrical *bricoleurs* whose work aims to articulate their subjective experience to more general aspects of the world. The notion of poetic *dispositif* thus moves away from Foucault's strategic dimension and towards a more affective one, which we can find in Jean-François Lyotard's libidinal definition of the *dispositif* as «the positive and affirmative formation of the distribution of libidinal intensities that however always disrupts them up to dysfunction»¹⁸. The inventive dimension of poetic documents resides in the subjective and sometimes lyrical intervention of the poet on the original material.

2. Poetic Bricolages

We have seen that the notion of *bricolage* highlights the conception of invention at play in some contemporary poetic practices. What happens to poetry in this shift towards *bricolage*? *Bricolage* is a process of invention that is important for many contemporary poets as it allows them to create a space in which they can interact with the everyday. This space has political implications as a conception of poetry as *bricolage* means that the world is always already present in the poem, that the poem cannot abstract and detach itself from the mundane affairs of everyday world. Following Butor, poetry and art create new worlds through *bricolage*. Timothy Matthew Lee Sutton's poem «Between» highlights this creative and inventive dimension. Its subtitle, «A Bricolage Poem»¹⁹, makes explicit this DIY dimension. Sutton borrows oppositions between two terms from various scientific sources, such as «between ethics and aesthetics», or «between possibility and potentiality», to provide a different perspective on these oppositions. Rather than repeating the binary oppositions, Sutton highlights the spaces between.

A poetic *bricolage* is thus the invention of a space where traditional categories of thought can be questioned. In this sense, as David Crouch argues, «Spacing is creative and political»²⁰. Poetry becomes the invention of a space from which we can rethink our categories and make visible what is usually left hidden in these spaces

(K. Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age*, Columbia University Press, New York 2011; M. Perloff, *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 2010). Such uses of pre-existing text can be related to practices of misappropriation (*détournement*) or ready-made (N. Dupont et E. Trudel (eds.), *Pratiques et enjeux du détournement dans le discours littéraire des XXe et XXIe siècles*, Presses de l'Université du Québec, Québec 2012; G. Théval, *Poésies ready-made: XXe-XXIe SIÈCLE*, L'Harmattan, Paris 2015).

¹⁸ J.-F. Lyotard, *Des dispositifs pulsionnels*, Éditions Galilée, Paris 1994, p. 160. My translation: «formation toute positive, affirmative, de la distribution des intensités libidinales, mais les détraquant toujours jusqu'au dysfonctionnement.»

¹⁹ T. Matthew Lee Sutton, «Between: A Bricolage Poem», *Qualitative Inquiry* 29, n° 10 (2023): pp. 1091-93, <https://doi.org/10.1177/10778004221123959>.

²⁰ D. Crouch, «Bricolage, Poetics, Spacing», *Humanities* 6, n° 4 (2017): 5, <https://doi.org/10.3390/h6040095>.

between. Following Jacques Rancière, both art and politics aim to draft maps of the visible through a «distribution of the sensible» that works towards a redefinition of what is common and of the ways of acting within this common²¹. A distribution of the sensible determines roles and functions, «parts and positions», for the subjects in language. Poetic *bricolages* are attempts to operate such a distribution of the sensible, to make us aware of spaces of visibility and invisibility. As we will see in the next section, one way to do so is by working on documents and highlighting what these documents show and what they hide, what kind of distribution of the sensible they operate and how poetry can operate a redistribution of the sensible.

Through *bricolage* and its creation of common ways of being in the world, this (re)distribution of the sensible reveals the political dimension of poetry: as Décio Pignatari argues «Pragmatism of *bricolage* leads to the political dimension»²². Applied to poetry, this statement suggests that a pragmatic understanding of poetry reveals its political dimension. By operating a redistribution of the sensible, by creating a space of visibility, poetry allows for what is usually hidden to become apparent. What is hidden is however not a secret core that art needs to disclose in a Romantic sense. It is rather that, following Ludwig Wittgenstein: «The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something-because it is always before one's eyes.)»²³. The redistribution of the sensible is thus a redistribution of attention that aims to bring the readers to see what they usually overlook.

The notion of attention has come to play a central role in contemporary poetics, as Jeff Barda argues:

In the case of contemporary French poets, we could also add that they neither seek to decrypt the world nor to aestheticize it, but to create new forms of attention. Through the repurposing of textual residues, they do not intend to suspend communicative patterns by placing the reader in temporary isolation. Instead, what is at stake is direct contact with our mediatized attention through the insertion of sudden bifurcations, short-circuits in the flow²⁴.

A poetic document or *dispositif* becomes a way of redirecting attention, of intentionally redirecting the reader's attention in order to show them something they usually overlook. Through this notion of attention, we can thus find a notion of intention that seems to disappear with uncreative writing. As Lucy Alford argues, there are at least two kinds of attention. A first one, «Active, or endogenous, attention is characterized by an intentional work of attention in which the subject

²¹ J. Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. G. Rockhill, Continuum, London and New York 2004, p. 7.

²² D. Pignatari, «Montage, Collage, Bricolage or: Mixture is the Spirit», trans. K. M. Benson Mundy, *Dispositio* 6, n° 17-18 (1981): p. 44.

²³ L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, et J. Schulte, Wiley-Blackwell, Malden, MA and Oxford 2009, paragr. 129.

²⁴ J. Barda, *Experimentation and the Lyric in Contemporary French Poetry*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2020, p. 311.

deliberately and purposefully focuses his or her attention on the object at hand»²⁵. This active attention involves intentionality: we intentionally focus our attention on something rather than something else. But there is a second form of attention, Alford pursues: «In passive, or exogenous, attention, the subject's attention is caught and held by changes or movement in the environment, or by the sheer arresting nature of the object itself»²⁶. Passive attention seems to not involve intention. To the contrary as our intentional attention might be distracted by something and our attention caught by something else. However, this second form of attention—which is a form of distraction—can be the first step in shifting towards the first, active form of attention²⁷.

This interplay of active and passive attention relates to Jean-Christophe Bailly's conception of a poetic receptivity: «Receptivity would therefore be nothing else than the action of the poem, than the maintenance of language in its state of agitation»²⁸. This receptivity involves a form of attention, as Bailly pursues: «What is found by the ways of the most abrupt and simple modernity is the idea of an attention, of an attentive and worried listening; it is the necessity of a relation to things that is not that of enjoyment or profit and rejection, but that of regard, consideration, and wonder»²⁹. Poetic documents or *dispositifs* are built around this interplay of intention and attention: the author's attention is caught by a text or a situation that brings them to direct their attention actively or intentionally towards this specific text or situation. In a second step they present this text to readers, with varying degrees of intervention. The active attention of readers is thus redirected towards a text that would normally not catch their attention.

A poetic *bricolage* such as Sutton's poem is what Hanna calls a «poetic *dispositif*» that redirects our attention and trains our eye to see what we usually overlook: «Through its power of reexposition, any *dispositif* possesses a reflexive, projective, and critical dimension. [...] The creation of a *dispositif* is a political action in the sense that it makes manifest what usually remains invisible in the "order of things"—*banalised*, in the police sense of the term, that by which this order holds»³⁰. Poetic

²⁵ L. Alford, *Forms of Poetic Attention*, Columbia University Press, New York 2020.

²⁶ *Idem*

²⁷ Attention studies is a growing field in contemporary research (<https://attentionstudies.org/>) and a recent volume explores close reading in relation to attention, see M. Thain — E. Jones (eds.), *Close Reading as Attentional Practice*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2025. From a different perspective, Yves Citton also explores the ecology and economy of attention, see Y. Citton, *Pour une écologie de l'attention*, Seuil, Paris 2014, and Y. Citton (ed.), *L'économie de l'attention. Nouvel horizon du capitalisme ?*, La découverte, Paris 2014.

²⁸ J.-C. Bailly, *L'élargissement du poème*, Christian Bourgois éditeur, Paris 2015, pp. 71-72. My translation: «[L]a réceptivité, ce ne serait donc rien d'autre que l'action du poème, que le maintien du langage dans son état d'agitation».

²⁹ Bailly, *L'élargissement du poème*, op. cit., p. 201. My translation: «Et ce qui est retrouvé par là, par les voies de la modernité la plus abrupte et la plus simple, c'est l'idée d'une attention, d'une écoute attentive, inquiète, c'est la nécessité d'un mouvement envers les choses qui ne soit plus celui de la jouissance ou du profit et du rejet, mais celui de l'égard, de la considération, de l'étonnement».

³⁰ Hanna, *Nos dispositifs poétiques*, op. cit., pp. 19-20. My translation: «Par sa puissance de réexposition, tout dispositif possède une dimension réflexive, projective, et critique. [...] La création d'un dispositif est une action politique, dans la mesure où elle manifeste ce qui demeure couramment invisible dans "l'ordre des choses"—*banalisé*, au sens policier du terme—, ce, donc, par quoi cet ordre tient».

documents—or poetic *dispositifs* to use Hanna’s vocabulary—train our attention to see what is banalised in the «order of things». The poetic work aims to highlight aspects of our uses of language that are usually hidden. Not because these aspects are in need of a metaphysical or romantic disclosure, but because they are embedded in the very fabric of our ordinary world. In Sutton’s case, it is customary for many kinds of discourses to use oppositions between two terms, but we fail to notice the space between these terms. The binary opposition highlights its poles and hides the space between them. Through the repetition of binary oppositions, Sutton redirects our attention from the poles to the spaces between and thus produces a new public discourse. Leibovici considers this making public to be a central aspect as a poetic document «produces, like maps, new *representations* of *public* problems (in john dewey’s sense) and aims to be used, taken back and spread by anyone»³¹. This representation moves away from the factuality of the report and towards the experience of the value of poetry, thus replaying the old philosophical opposition between fact and value.

Poetry creates a space of visibility that amounts, in political terms, to having a voice. How does the voice of the poem become a political voice? How can the poem give a voice to those who are silenced and invisible? Rancière argues that there is a tension between the voice of normativity and the voice of the voiceless. He calls the normative voice the police. Not in the sense of the «petty police» *qua* state apparatus, but as a force that distributes places and roles, as «an order of the visible and the sayable that sees that a particular activity is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and another as noise»³². This police *qua* normative force distinguishes between discourse and noise, between visible and invisible, between heard and unheard. In society, this police becomes a law that attributes roles and tasks. The oppressed are those who are not given a role in the political system, those whose voice is considered as noise. If politics as a form of experience is determined by the distribution of the sensible, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, it is a process of inclusion and exclusion, of determining who can speak and who cannot. There is therefore, in the political realm, an exclusion of the voiceless that poetry aims to reintegrate.

3. Frank Smith’s *Syrie, l’invention de la guerre*

Syrie, l’invention de la guerre (2023) pursues the investigations of social and political violence that Frank Smith undertook in *Guantanamo* (2010) and *Gaza d’ici-là* (2013) among other works. Smith’s source text for *Syria* is the *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic* that focuses on the events that happened in Syria in 2013. The work is divided in two

³¹ Leibovici, *des documents poétiques*, op. cit., p. 79. My translation: «un document poétique [] engendre, à l’instar des cartes, de nouvelles *représentations* de problèmes *publiques* (au sens où l’entend john dewey) et vise à être utilisé, repris et diffusé par tout un chacun». I follow Leibovici’s aesthetic and poetic choice not to use capital letters throughout his works.

³² J. Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose, University of Minnesota Press 2008, p. 29.

parts, one on the violations outside of combat and one on the violations within combat, that are each divided in chapters focusing on specific themes. What is striking in Smith's reconstruction of the report is the depersonalisation that is at play in the report itself. By using a passive voice and an impersonal pronoun, Smith highlights the distance that is created in the language of the report itself. The two parts of the work is preceded by an «Envoi» which will be the focus of my analysis as it presents the poetic perspective of the work.

From the outset, Wittgenstein's influence is made explicit with an epigraph from the *Tractatus*: «6.4321 — The facts all belong only to the task and not to its performance». This proposition applies to most poetic documents, in the sense that they build on facts to offer new ways of seeing. These new ways of seeing are necessary to approach the facts, and the problem of seeing is precisely at the heart of the «Envoi». It begins and ends on similar questions: «Il s'est passé quelque chose / mais quoi»³³ «Qu'est-ce qui / s'est passé? / Que va-t-il / se passer / à présent ? / Qu'est-ce qui / s'est passé / pour qu'on en arrive là?»³⁴. These questions raise the issue of the transformation of facts into events. How does a fact become an event? Through a poetic reading of the document, Smith suggests a new way of seeing facts and events: «Ce n'est pas tant le fait lui-même / qu'il importe / que ce qui est affirmé / revendiqué ou prétendu par lui»³⁵. The fact in itself has less importance than what the fact reveals of the event. And so the framing of the fact becomes of central significance. What happens to the facts in the framing of the report? Such is the question that Smith aims to investigate and to overturn by reframing the report. How can facts become visible in the archive?

Like the report, *Syrie* is written from an impersonal perspective, on which the «Envoi» insists by repeating the impersonal pronoun «on»: «on dit», «dit-on», «on demande», «on est», «on crie», etc. This insistence aims to show that the voices are silenced in the report, that the screams become mute: «Quels sont les voix les corps / qui passent / dans ces questions?»³⁶, «on crie muets»³⁷, «Quelle existence / pour la parole — / on dit — / qui ne dispose plus de la parole?»³⁸. How can poetry bring the voice back to the body? How can poetry bring the voice back to the voices themselves? «Comment rendre / aux mots / à la parole / leur valeur de lutte?»³⁹. The work on the report is a process that gives this force back to voices that have been silenced in the archive. The poetic dimension of *Syrie* lies in this process rather than the product. It is not to be found in a so-called «poetic language» but in what we do with language. In this sense, and as Hanna suggests, the distinction between ordinary and poetic uses of language is no longer determinable *a priori*:

We do not presuppose the existence of a poetic language that causes a

³³ F. Smith, *Syrie, l'invention de la guerre*, Lanskine, Corcoué-sur-Logne 2023, p. 15.

³⁴ Smith, op. cit., p. 20.

³⁵ Smith, op. cit., p. 16.

³⁶ Smith, op. cit., p. 17.

³⁷ Smith, op. cit., p. 18.

³⁸ Smith, op. cit., p. 20.

³⁹ Smith, op. cit., p. 17.

poetic experience, but we consider any experience declared as «poetic» to be an experience of particularly intense interactions, «integrating» (in the electric sense of the word) various language-games and social practices.⁴⁰

We must no longer look at formal properties to distinguish between ordinary and poetic language, but look at what the language is doing, following a pragmatic conception of poetics.

Poetic documents move from an essentialist poetics to a performative one in which, as Henri Meschonnic argues, «the poem does something. It does something to language and to poetry. It does something to the subject. To the subject that composes it, to the subject that reads it»⁴¹. Against the idea that poetry is remote from the ordinary world, the doing of poetry suggests that it is involved in our everyday life. It affects language (and our related worldviews) and the subject. Poetry creates a subjectivity that can be shared through language. It makes visible some aspects of the world that we usually overlook.

By presenting the report in a new poetic light, Smith aims to create a space in which this voice can be brought back to hearing level. The insistence on the impersonal in the «Envoi» aims to create a distance, to show the reader the distance that is created in the report. Even though the report is supposedly a way of preserving voices, the very process of the becoming archive renders these voices voiceless. The voices that can be heard do not lead to anything new, as the «Envoi» continues with a series resolutions reduced to single verbs all ending variations on «Décide de se saisir de la question». However, this decision leads to nothing but a new resolution with the same ending. This reduction of the resolutions to their verbs aims to highlight the decisions reached and actions to take. These decisions, despite their appearance, are not actions: they do not lead to change. The performativity of the language of the reports runs idle, like metaphysical language for Wittgenstein. Can poetry bring the change that the report fails to reach? Can the voices become voiceful again through the poetic process?

Following this reading, Smith's *Syrie* is an attempt at drafting a map of the visible through the archive. In the report, language is neutralised in such ways that the experience of the oppressed can never be heard. Even though people can express themselves in such reports, there is a form of silencing that makes their voices voiceless. The transcription makes them lose their individuality, and hence prevents any empathy from the reader, producing a form of soul-blindness⁴². The neutralisation of language places these voices at such a distance that they become

⁴⁰ Hanna, *Nos dispositifs poétiques*, op. cit., p. 47. My translation: «Ce qui revient à dire qu'on ne présuppose pas l'existence d'un langage poétique comme cause d'une expérience poétique, mais qu'on envisage toute expérience déclarée "poétique" comme une expérience d'interactions particulièrement intense, "intégrant" (au sens électrique du terme) divers jeux de langage ou de pratiques sociales».

⁴¹ H. Meschonnic, *Célébration de la poésie*, Verdier, Lagrasse 2001, p. 43. My translation: «le poème fait quelque chose. Il fait quelque chose au langage, et à la poésie. Il fait quelque chose au sujet. Au sujet qui le compose, au sujet qui le lit.».

⁴² Jonathan Havercroft and David Owen argue that the exclusion of the voiceless is a form of soul-blindness in our «failure to see their suffering as suffering of the same kind as our own». (J. Havercroft et D. Owen, «Soul-Blindness, Police Orders and Black Lives Matter: Wittgenstein, Cavell, and Rancière », *Political Theory* 44, n° 6 (2016): p. 744.)

silent. In his work, Smith creates a new space in which their voices can be heard, a space that reveals the linguistic oppression and aims to overturn it. It is interesting that Smith reaches such an effect by reinforcing the neutral character of language, thus bringing the reader's attention to the process of neutralisation and silencing. By making this process visible and graspable, Smith aims to overturn the silencing.

By drafting maps of the visible, poetic documents are *bricolages* that aim at inventing something new. Hence the second part of the title of *Syrie, l'invention de la guerre*. By exploring documents in a poetic way, Smith aims to reveal how war is invented in the language of the report. Against the language of the engineer that we can find in the reports, a language that has been stripped of all subjectivity, a poetic reading aims to bring this subjectivity back. By transforming a report into a poetic document, Smith creates a space of visibility and aims to give a voice back to the voiceless. As Leibovici argues, «the aim of a poetic document is not to *make believe* nor to *pretend* that it is a simple document, but to the contrary to establish a space with specific properties to uncover implicit mediations and offer remediations».⁴³ Smith creates such a space with specific linguistic properties and thus uncovers what is hidden under the language of reports. By creating a space of visibility, poetic documents give a voice to the voiceless, to those whose voice has been silenced by linguistic oppression. In this doing, poetry encounters politics, invention becomes intervention.

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⁴³ Leibovici, *des documents poétiques*, op. cit., p. 50. My translation: «il ne s'agit donc pas, pour le document poétique, de *faire croire* qu'il est un simple document, ni de *faire illusion*, mais, au contraire, de constituer un espace aux propriétés spécifiques pour mettre au jour des médiations implicites et proposer des remédiations».

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