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# Reality and Imagination in *Gaspard de la Nuit*

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I hereby recognize and pledge to fulfill my responsibilities as defined in the Honor Code and to maintain the integrity of both myself and the College community as a whole.

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# Abstract

Maurice Ravel once said, “My ambition is to say with notes what a poet expresses with words”(qtd. in Eccles 1), and Aloysius Bertrand’s collection of poems, *Gaspard de la Nuit*, certainly captured Ravel’s musical imagination. This thesis explores the interplay of reality and imagination in Bertrand’s and Ravel’s “*Gaspard de la Nuit.*” An identifiable theme in the poems as well as the music, the interplay of reality and imagination is explored in a comparative approach, with each chapter focusing on one poem and the piano piece that it inspired. Through analysis of Bertrand’s text and Ravel’s motivic, harmonic and formal structure, we can see a parallelism between Bertrand’s and Ravel’s treatments of reality and imagination. This study allows readers, audiences and musicians to view Ravel’s composition as both a recreation of Bertrand’s poem and a creation in its own right that sheds light on the original literary work.

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# Introduction

On November 4, 1889, 14-year-old Maurice Ravel passed the piano entrance examination for the prestigious *Conservatoire de Paris* (Orenstein 2). Born in Ciboure, France, a Basque village near the Spanish border, Ravel did not take long to form a friendship with a piano student from Spain, Ricardo Viñes, through their Spanish-speaking mothers. As Ravel's career proved later, their friendship would grow into a cooperation that continued to provide musical and intellectual stimulation throughout Ravel's life.[1]

Starting from their teenage years at the *Conservatoire*, Viñes was not only an exceptionally gifted pianist, but also an avid reader who shared with Ravel an "insatiable curiosity"(Orenstein 3). Together they explored the contemporary piano repertoire, Parisian museums and exhibitions and literature. Judging from the large amount of time they spent together, Viñes most likely knew about Ravel's literary taste through his appreciation for Stéphane Mallarmé, Edgar Allan Poe and Charles Baudelaire, and by 1896, handed him a small book, titled *Gaspard de la Nuit* (Roberts 80).[2]

*Gaspard de la Nuit* was a collection of prose poems published in 1842, 33 years before Ravel was born and one year after its author, Aloysius Bertrand, had passed away "*isolé, sans ressources, presque sans amis*" (Bernard 50). Considered one of the *poètes maudits*, Bertrand

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[1] Viñes premiered six important piano compositions (including *Gaspard de la Nuit*) by Ravel between 1898 and 1909. As one of the founding members of *Les Apaches*, an artistic circle at the turn of the century, he participated regularly in the music making and literary discussions of the group. His playing of Debussy's music in the group meetings kept Ravel informed of his colleague's work even when they were not personally in touch.

[2] "In September 1896, Viñes recorded a reading that lasted late into the evening of 'Bertrand's Gaspard de la Nuit,which I let [Ravel] take with him' " (Roberts 80).

did not receive much attention from the romantic writers and critics of the *Cénacle* during his lifetime; when *Gaspard de la Nuit* was finally published posthumously, Sainte-Beuve dismissed the poems as "*joujoux gothiques*" (Bernard 50). It was not until the dawn of the symbolist movement that Bertrand started to gain a wider reputation in the literary milieu. Baudelaire first regarded him as the creator of the genre "*poème en prose*"(Baudelaire 208) in France, which is now a point of view shared by prominent scholars[3], and the genre continued to flourish under the pens of Stéphane Mallarmé, Arthur Rimbaud, etc.

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It is not difficult to understand why Ravel, curious and literary-minded, would be gripped by this small collection of poetry, and even after he returned the book to Viñes, continued dwelling on it. At a first glimpse, the overall theme and atmosphere of *Gaspard de la Nuit* must have attracted Ravel immediately. The title suggests a nocturnal setting, and in a short prose that serves as a "forward" Bertrand credits the writing of these poems to Gaspard de la Nuit, whom he discovers to be the devil himself and whose manuscript he decides to publish. This unusual "forward" sets a mysterious and fantastic undertone for the whole book. Populated by gnomes, magicians, sorcerers, phantoms and nightmarish creatures, Bertrand's fantasy could trace back to "*les premières traductions d'Hoffmann*" in France in 1829 (Milner 39-40), amid the waves of romanticism.

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[3] "Il est rare d'assister à la naissance d'un genre littéraire. Plus rare encore de pouvoir la rattacher au nom d'un écrivain particulier. Cette conjonction s'est pourtant opérée dans le cas d'Aloysius Bertrand, inventeur incontestable du poème en prose français" (Milner, *Préface* to *Gaspard de la Nuit*, 7).

"...il y a une poésie de la prose qui commence à *Gaspard*, parce que Bertrand est le véritable créateur (et ce point n'a jamais, je crois, été contesté) du poème en prose comme *genre* littéraire" (Bernard 50-51).

Ravel was familiar with the mystery and the macabre in literature and always responded to it. One proof was his fondness of Poe. Back in the days at the *Conservatoire*, when Ravel would explore new sonorities on the piano with Viñes after reading Poe (Roberts 80), he established a connection between the macabre in literary romanticism in literature and his own post-romantic musical imagination. He also knew quite well the musical--particularly pianistic--language related to the fantastic and learned much of it from Liszt. Ravel was open about his preference for Liszt; "his own musical library was replete with Liszt scores, many in first prints" (Howat 165). Compositions such as the *Mephisto Waltzes*, *Feux Follets*, *Gnomenreigen*, etc. showed him the possible tools to translate his literary sensibility into music, which he would later borrow and elaborate.

Paired with the mysterious and the fantastic was Bertrand's workmanship, which might be another aspect of *Gaspard de la Nuit* that attracted Ravel. As Suzanne Bernard pointed out in her study *Le Poème en prose*, Bertrand revised his poems over and over again in order to reach the greatest concision possible, because "pour Bertrand, comme pour Mallarmé plus tard, chaque mot compte" (68-70). This meticulosity earned him the reputation of "goldsmith of words" (Perlemuter, Jourdan-Morhange 31). The architecture of the whole book was also carefully planned out. The poems are "*harmonieusement groupés*" (Derche 324) into 6 chapters and 13 *Pièces Détachées*, and yet even in the same volume, each poem is enclosed in a unique scene, filmed from a distinct angle. By grouping and isolating the poems simultaneously, Bertrand discretely achieved a fragmented and yet coherent narrative.

Ravel shared with Bertrand the same workmanship. According to his own words, his objective was technical perfection, and while "art, no doubt, has other effects," the artist

"should have no other aim" (Orenstein 38). His comment on his own music--"quite simple, nothing but Mozart" also reveals his love for precision and concision, possibly inherited from his Swiss engineer father. Regarding forms in music, Ravel was equally a magician. From his remarks on Mallarmé[4], we can grasp his ideal of form:

> ...unbounded visions, yet precise in design, enclosed in a mystery of sombre abstractions--an art where all the elements are so intimately bound up together that one cannot analyze, but only sense, its effect (Orenstein 45-46).

A seamless form, omnipresent yet invisible, coincides with Bertrand's ideal about form.

Furthermore, Bertrand and Ravel were both interested in uniting more than one form of art. The subtitle of Bertrand's *Gaspard de la Nuit* is *Fantasie à la manière de Rembrandt et de Callot*. Masters of painting and printmaking of the Baroque era, Rembrandt and Callot were a major influence on the *imaginaire* of Bertrand as well as his style. In *Gaspard de la Nuit*, Bertrand managed to impose this transposition of art on his readers through "*le pittoresque du vocabulaire*" (Derche 332).

Ravel openly expressed his opinion on the integration of the arts in the following words:

> For me, there are not several arts, but only one: music, painting, and literature differ only in their means of expression. Thus, there aren't different kinds of artists, but simply different kinds of specialists" (Ravel, ed. Orenstein 393).

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[4] Ravel made his remark on Mallarmé during a lecture titled "Contemporary Music", which he gave before a recital of his music at Rice Institute (now Rice University) in Houston, Texas, on April 7 (Ravel, ed. Orenstein 40).

Apart from the love of literature we have already seen, Ravel's musical sensibility was also nurtured by his appreciation for painting. Ravel himself was a lifelong admirer of Edouard Manet. Emmanuel Chabrier, the one French composer from whom Ravel claimed to have learned the most, was closest to the Impressionist painters and had one of the largest collections of Impressionist paintings. The new discoveries of light and color reflected in the Impressionist paintings were also found in Ravel's exploration of novel sonorities. If Bertrand painted with his words, Ravel did so with sound.

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Ravel once said, "My ambition is to say with notes what a poet expresses with words"(qtd. in Eccles 1). Bertrand's *Gaspard de la Nuit* certainly captured Ravel's imagination. He repaid Viñes for the introduction of Bertrand's work by dedicating to him the newly composed *Gaspard de la Nuit: Trois poèmes pour piano d'après Aloysius Bertrand*, and Viñes premiered the work on January 9, 1909 at the Salle Erard, Paris (Mawer 258). Ravel not only paid homage to Bertrand in the title of his music, but also included in his score the full texts of "*Ondine*," "*Le Gibet*" and "*Scarbo*", the three poems on which his composition was immediately based (Durand, 1909 edition). It was not unusual for composers to add a few suggestive word that arouse a feeling or create an atmosphere, since Paris at the *Belle Epoque* was a melting pot of different forms of art, but to insert poems in full length in a score of piano music was not common practice. As we have discussed above, Ravel's musical response grew out of reading the entire work, but one logical interpretation of the inclusion of the poems is that the composer is inviting the reader to investigate the relationship between the narratives of these specific poems and his music.

Even a cursory glance at each of the three poems shows some connections. In "*Ondine,*" the narrator meets a water nymph who begs him to marry her only to discover that he is to marry a mortal. In "*Le Gibet*," the narrator seeks to determine whether a sound he hears comes from the nearby gibbet, on which a man was hanged, or the bells from afar. In *Scarbo*, the narrator tells his encounters with Scarbo, a dwarfish creature who disturbs his dwelling before vanishing into thin air. In all three poems, the stories are told from the narrator's perspective, and one might wonder to what extent reality is colored by the narrator's own imagination—all is dark, one can only look inward. The boundary between reality and imagination is a theme that underlies all three poems. Consequently, one would wonder how Ravel, from a composer's point of view, perceived this theme in Bertrand's poems and by what musical means he wove it into his own work.

In order to examine this question, a comparative approach is necessary. To that end, I will divide the main body of this study into three chapters, each dedicated to one poem and the piano piece it inspired. By analyzing first how Bertrand treats reality and imagination in the poem and then how Ravel recreates them in the music through motivic, harmonic and structural devices, we will be able to compare the literary and musical representations of the reality and imagination. Through the comparative analysis, we will be able to answer the following questions: in each poem and its corresponding piano piece, do Bertrand and Ravel both strive to blur (or distinguish) the borders between reality and imagination, or does Ravel have a different view on the relationship between reality and imagination from Bertrand? What can we say about Ravel as a reader and how would Ravel's reading of Bertrand, from the unique perspective of a composer, influence ours?

# 1. Ondine

*……Je croyais entendre*

*Une vague harmonie enchanter mon sommeil*

*Et près de moi s'épandre un murmure pareil*

*Aux chants entrecoupés d'une voix triste et tendre.*

*CH. Brugnot, Les deux Génies.*

*—"Ecoute ! - Ecoute ! - C'est moi, c'est Ondine qui frôle de ces gouttes d'eau les losanges sonores de ta fenêtre illuminée par les mornes rayons de la lune ; et voici, en robe de moire, la dame châtelaine qui contemple à son balcon la belle nuit étoilée et le beau lac endormi.*

*"Chaque flot est un ondin qui nage dans le courant, chaque courant est un sentier qui serpente vers mon palais, et mon palais est bâti fluide, au fond du lac, dans le triangle du feu, de la terre et de l'air.*

*"Ecoute ! - Ecoute ! - Mon père bat l'eau coassante d'une branche d'aulne verte, et mes soeurs caressent de leurs bras d'écume les fraîches îles d'herbes, de nénuphars et de glaïeuls, ou se moquent du saule caduc et barbu qui pêche à la ligne !"*

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*Sa chanson murmurée, elle me supplia de recevoir son anneau à mon doigt pour être l'époux d'une Ondine, et de visiter avec elle son palais pour être le roi des lacs.*

*Et comme je lui répondais que j'aimais une mortelle, boudeuse et dépitée, elle pleura quelques larmes, poussa un éclat de rire, et s'évanouit en giboulées qui ruisselèrent blanches le long de mes vitraux bleus*

(Bertrand 149-150).

…I thought I heard

A vague harmony enchanting my sleep

And close to me spread such a murmur

In broken melodies with a sad and soft voice

CH. Brugnot, *Les deux Génies.*

"Listen! – Listen! – It's me, it's Ondine who brushes with these drops of water the resonant diamonds of your window lit by the gloomy moonlight; and there in her silken robe is the lady of the manor contemplating from her balcony the lovely star-bright night and the beautiful, sleeping lake.

"Each ripple is a 'child of the waves' swimming with the current, each current is a path winding towards my palace, and my palace is built fluid, at the bottom of the lake, in the triangle of fire, earth and air.

"Listen! – Listen! – My father beats the croaking water with a branch of green alder, and my sisters caress with their arms of foam the cool islands of herbs, water lilies and gladioli, or make fun of the sickly, bearded willow that is fishing with rod and line.

*

Having murmured her song, she begged me to accept her ring on my finger, so that I would be the husband of an Ondine, and to visit her palace with her, so that I would be king of the lakes.

And when I replied that I loved a mortal woman, she wept a few tears, sulking and peevish, then broke into laughter, and vanished in showers of rain that drizzled white across my blue windowpane (Bruhn, 182).[5]

*Ondine*, or undine (from Latin *unda*, "wave"), is a mythical water spirit that has long captured the imagination of writers and composers across various regions in Europe. An early

[5] Prologue translated by author.

German romance, *Undine* (1811) by Friedrich la Motte Fouqué is based on a Norwegian version of the tale—a female habitant of the water that weeps for want of a soul. The story tells the unfortunate situation of two women—a water spirit and a mortal—falling in love with the same man. Undine, failing to gain his love, strangles the man to death. Not long after, de la Motte Fouqué collaborates with E.T.A. Hoffmann on adapting his work into an opera, followed by a list of other operas on the same subject, including *Undina* (1869) by Pyotr Tchaikovsky and *Rusalka* (1901) by Antonín Dvořák. Hans Christian Anderson offers another significant rendition of the subject in his fairy-tale *The Little Mermaid* (1837). Anderson focuses not only on the importance of gaining a soul, but also the sacrifice that the little mermaid must make, including "the problematic image of splitting the fish tail into legs in order to love a man" (Bruhn 185) and her eventual tragedy of dissolving into sea foams.

In Bertrand's "*Ondine*," the poet follows la Motte Fouqué and Anderson in casting three main characters—the water spirit Ondine, the man and the mortal woman—while presenting the traditional plot in a skeletal manner: in five short stanzas, Ondine tries but fails to gain the love of the man, who has a mortal lover. However, three significant aspects of Bertrand's "*Ondine*" set it apart from its predecessors: a narration from the man's point of view, a setting at nightfall and the absence of soul. As we shall see, the three aspects unique to Bertrand's version contribute to blurring the boundary between reality and imagination in his poem.

(1) A narration from the man's point of view

In both de la Motte Fouqué and Anderson, third-person narration adds objectivity to the tales. Bertrand, however, uses first-person narration, which in itself suggests subjectivity and puts the number of narrator(s) in question.

Visually, the five stanzas are divided into two parts: the first three stanzas are separated from the last two by a large space and an asterisk. It is reported that Bertrand has given specific instructions to his publisher regarding the layout of his poems: "*Règle gé*nérale.—*Blanch*ir *comme si le texte était de la poésie*" (Bertrand 27). Max Milner comments on this practice, "*Aloysius Bertrand avait parfaitement conscience de l'importance de ces blancs, qui donnent à ses poèmes leur allure elliptique et lacunaire.*" He also remarks, "*Il est évident que ces recommandations n'ont pas pour seul but de donner à la prose l'apparence de la poésie.*" (Bertrand 27) In this particular case, the large blank space creates a shot reverse shot[6]: Ondine is first shown singing to the man, and then the man talks back. The shot reverse shot technique suggests a clear divide in narrative angles, and therefore we have two distinct narrators, Ondine and the man.

However, the bipartite division of narrative angles may not stand because Ondine's words are less objective that the man's. Notice that Ondine's narration is framed within quotation marks while the man's is not. Thus Ondine's narration is susceptible to the man's interpretation. The reader must ask: is it really the man quoting Ondine's words or imagining them? In other words, is Ondine's existence real or imaginary?

[6] A cinematographic technique. In one shot, a character is shown talking to another (often off screen), and in the next, the other character is shown talking or looking back at the first character. The spectators thus assume that they are talking to each other.

It is possible that the division in narrative angles is a fact only embraced by the man, whose imagination is fighting reality. "*La dame chêtelaine*" in the first stanza is most likely the "*mortelle*" that the man claims to be in love with in the last stanza. The second stanza of the poem tells us how perfect Ondine's world is:

> *Chaque flot est un ondin qui nage dans le courant, chaque courant est un sentier qui serpente vers mon palais, et mon palais est bâti fluide, au fond du lac, dans le triangle du feu, de la terre et de l'air.*

This passage features a progression (*flot, courant, lac*) that culminates in a unity of the four elements found in Ondine's palace. Bertrand was interested in the Middle Ages, when people believed that four elements are the simplest essential parts with which anything in our universe is built or on which the fundamental powers of everything is based. The world of Ondine is so implausibly complete and perfect that it will easily eclipse life with a mortal woman and the mundane domestic life that accompanies it. Then Ondine's whole narration could be interpreted as the man's otherworldly fantasy that evokes possibilities that the reality rejects.

As we saw, by carefully placing the spaces and the quotation marks, Bertrand successfully plants doubts in his reader's mind about the existence of Ondine.

(1) A setting at nightfall

In addition to the narrator's voluntary fantasy, a further attempt by Bertrand to blur reality and imagination is to associate Ondine with the night, thus making it difficult for his narrator to distinguish the real from the imaginary. While previous versions of the story do not establish a link between Ondine and the night, this association is an important theme in

Bertrand's poem. *Ondine* is the antepenultimate poem in *La Nuit et ses prestiges* (Night and its glamour), the third book of *Gaspard de la Nuit*. The poems in this book largely deal with the mysterious and the fantastic at nightfall—"*La chambre gothique*" *(*The Gothique Room*)*, *Scarbo*[7], *Le clair de lune (*The Moonlight*)*, *Un rêve (*A Dream*)*… to name a few—and are therefore central to justifying "*la Nuit*" in the title of the collection. It is not surprising that Ravel chose "*Ondine*" to set as the opening movement of his composition in order to capture the listener's imagination about the night.

Night is often related to sleep. The prologue serves as an invitation for the reader to descend into somnolence with the narrator, "…*Je croyais entendre une vague harmonie enchanter mon sommeil.*" In the first stanza of the poem, we can identify a lexical field of night and sleepiness: *"mornes rayons de la lune,"* "*la belle nuit étoilée*," and "*le beau lac endormi*." It implies that the reader enters the frame of the poem right at the moment where the narrator is falling asleep, where his sense of reality becomes blurry.

A lexical field of perception, inseparable from the vocabulary that evokes the night, poses unresolved contradictions as a whole. From the beginning, the narrator is not sure that he is hearing something, but "*croyais entendre*," which suggests subjectivity. Is he hearing a real sound or imagining nothing but "*une vague harmonie*" that haunts his sleep? The vague harmony is joined by "*un murmure*," which also points to a blurred auditory sense. What is the murmur about? "*Aux chants entrecoupés d'une voix triste et tendre*." As the last line of the prologue leading into the poem, this sentence creates intriguing contradictions. First of all, a *chant* is a series of melodies, which in itself emphasizes the production of sound and

[7] Bertrand wrote two poems titled "*Scarbo*". This is not the "*Scarbo*" that Ravel chose.

suppresses the idea of clear lyrics, a product of articulated language. The fact that it is "*entrecoupé*" further impairs the articulateness in what the narrator thinks he is hearing. The first three stanzas that follow, on the other hand, are clearly a *chanson*, and the narrator is able to recite every word in its lyrics. With the ambiguity between "*chants*" and *chanson*, the concreteness of Ondine's song becomes suspicious, and so does the narrator's ability to distinguish the real from the imaginary.

A second contradiction lies in how Bertrand characterizes Ondine's song. According to the prologue, Ondine sings with "*une voix triste et tendre,*" although the poem indicates the opposite. A sense of urgency and intensity lie in the repetition and the exclamation marks of "*Ecoute! Ecoute!*" at the beginning of both the first and the third stanzas. She is eager for attention, impatient to hear the man's response. Moreover, not only does she want to declare her love with words, but also with action. Her song is filled with verbs describing movements that are associated either with her or the world where she comes from: "*frôle*" (to brush), "*nage*" (to swim), "*serpente*"(to snake), "*bat*" (to beat), etc., which are extremely dynamic to say the least, if not violent. This sudden change of mood and atmosphere from the prologue to the poem points to the incoherence in the perceptual ability of the man, who is not able to distinguish the reality and his imagination.

(2) The absence of soul

Parallel to the narrator's blurred sense of reality is a literary reality that Bertrand blends with his own imagination. In de la Motte Fouqué's story, the goal of the undine is not only to gain love, but a human soul through the love of the man. In Anderson's tale, the longing for a

soul is elevated to the same level of importance as the quest for love. The little mermaid's fate thus extends beyond romance to the curiosity of exploring a world much wider than her own palace underwater. The price for failure is equally high—her life. This heroic quest for love and the tragedy of trying to achieve the impossible—crossing the line between the human world and her own—give the story a gravity that became part of literary reality of the character.

Bertrand's poem clearly takes part in this pre-existing literary reality in terms of its subject but Ondine under the pen of the French poet has a very different personality. In Bertrand, the first stanza provides us with an overview of Ondine's personality by means of contrast:

> *C'est moi, c'est Ondine qui frôle de ces gouttes d'eau les losanges sonores de ta fenêtre illuminée par les mornes rayons de la lune ; et voici, en robe de moire, la dame châtelaine qui contemple à son balcon la belle nuit étoilée et le beau lac endormi.*

He focuses, on one side of the semicolon, on movement (*frôle*) and noise (*les losanges sonores*)—exterior activity, and on the other, on stillness and silence (*comtemple, le beau lac endormi*)—interior activity. Ondine's child-like playfulness and frivolity is in contrast with the woman's serenity and nobility. The difference in the décor in which Bertrand situates the two characters is also revealing. While Ondine is in the lake, the woman is on a balcony of her manor in a silk dress; while Ondine is surrounded by gloomy moonlight, the woman is under a beautiful starry night. The lady-like and conventional figure of the woman highlights the wild and strange character of Ondine in her dark and mysterious surroundings.

The difference in personality between Bertrand's Ondine and her literary predecessors lies in her approach to love as well. In the fourth stanza, she is very direct in asking the man for his love:

> *Sa chason mumurée, elle me supplia de recevoir son anneau à mon doigt pour être l'époux d'une Ondine, et de visiter avec elle son palais pour être le roi des lacs .*

But is it really love that she begs for? Notice that Ondine does not evoke love, and even if love truly exists here, it is solely in a materialized form: by accepting Ondine's offer, the man will obtain a token (*son anneau*), a contract (*être l'époux*), wealth (*son palais*) and power (*être le roi*). The impression for the absence of true love is reinforced by contrast when the man uses the word *aimer* in his response: "*j'aimais une mortelle.*" Ondine's reaction to the man's answer is also drastically different from her predecessors'. The undine in de la Motte Fouqué strangles the man in a dramatic gesture of romance involving a last kiss, while the little mermaid embraces her own death. In comparison, Ondine's reaction is dismissive:

> *...boudeuse et dépitée, elle pleura quelques larmes, poussa un éclat de rire, et s'évanouit en giboulées qui ruisse-lèrent blanches le long de mes vitraux bleus.*

There is no death involved, only a minimal amount of tears (*quelques larmes*), and Ondine returns to her previous playfulness almost right away. The romantic element in the literary reality from which Bertrand extracts the character Ondine is trivialized.

Finally, the depiction of Ondine's habitat serves as a metaphor for Bertrand's perception of the character. In the second stanza, Ondine explains that "*chaque flot est un ondin qui nage dans le courant*," thus blurring the line between the habitat, the real-existing lake and its

inhabitants, a fantastic species. The third stanza further exploits the juxtaposition of the natural and the fantastic:

> *Mon père bat l'eau coassante d'une branche d'aulne verte, et mes soeurs caressent de leurs bras d'écume les fraîches îles d'herbes, de nénuphars et de glaïeuls, ou se moquent du saule caduc et barbu qui pêche à la ligne !*

A branch of green alder swirls on water because Ondine's father beats the water with the branch. The foams emerge and disappear on the water plants because Ondine's sisters caress those plants with their watery arms. A willow droops down into the lake because it is fishing with its branches. These images form an *imaginaire* of an enchanted lake where not only the water but also the whole ecosystem that contains it becomes increasing animate through the undines. The ripples stirred up by the undines change the water surface into a distorting mirror that can no longer reflect the true image of Ondine in her literary reality, but a caricature that of that reality, blended with all the imagination that Bertrand offers to us.

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Rather than translating Bertrand's "*Ondine*" into musical language in a literal and linear manner, Ravel maps the essential elements in the poem onto their musical representations in the first movement of his *Gaspard de la Nuit*. Bertrand's narrative is essentially defined by the interaction between the protagonists—Ondine and the man—and the omnipresent water element. In the analysis below, we will see how Ravel manipulates these two aspects to reflect what Bertrand depicts as blurred reality and imagination.
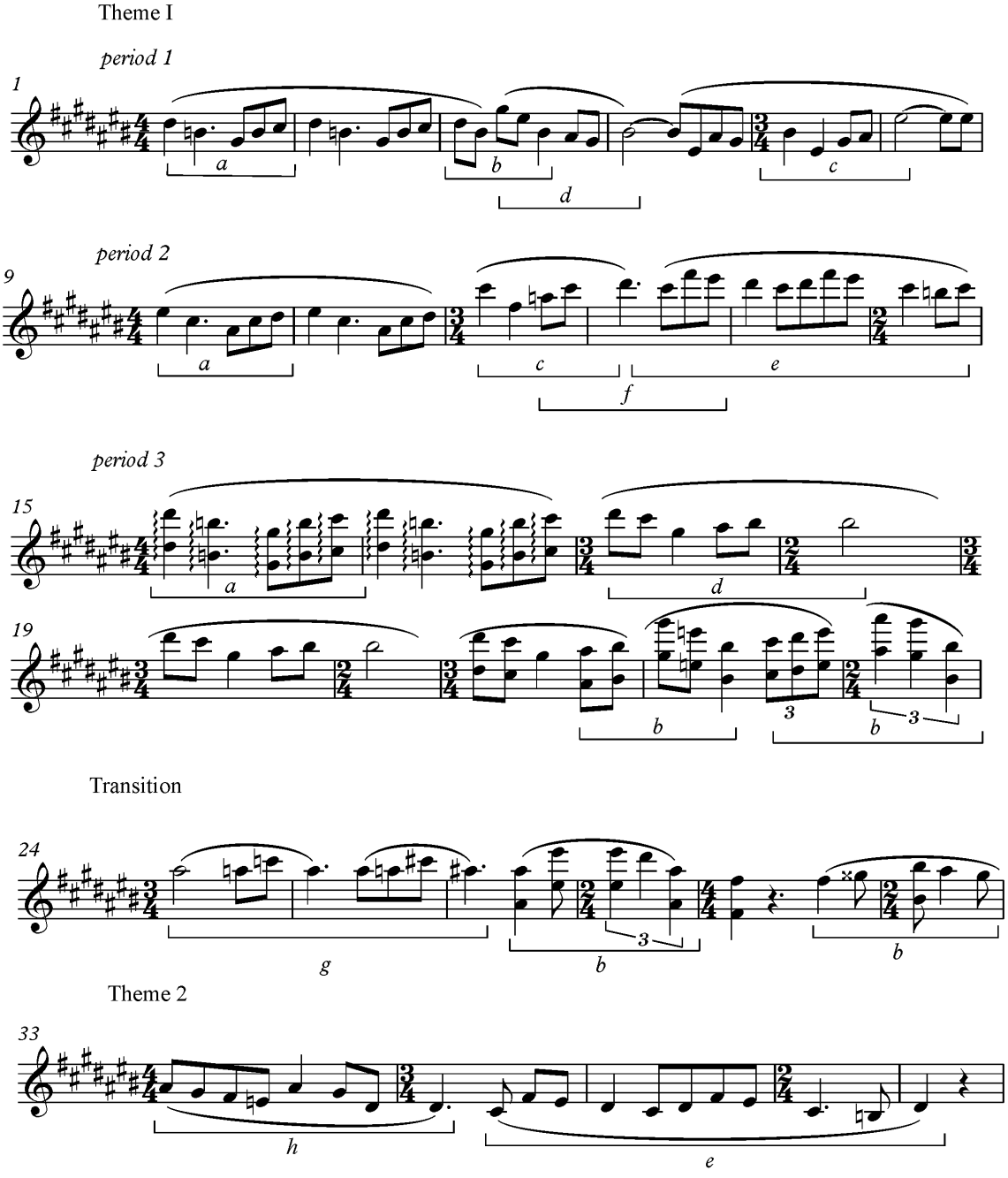
(1) Ondine and the man

In his analysis of Ravel's "*Ondine*", Olivier Messiaen points out that the form of this piece matches the "*forme sonate en mouvement lent*." (Messiaen 25) As we know, the essence of the sonata form lies in the treatment of its two themes, and Ravel's "*Ondine*" is not exception. Here, in the context of a musical interpretation of Bertrand's poem, we can see the two themes as a metaphor for our two protagonists.

Theme I and Theme II are shown in Example 1.1 on the next page, with the transition in the middle, and the lower case letters indicate the main components of themes that are later recapitulated (sometimes only rhythmically) to create new material. According to our analysis of the poem, the man's perception of Ondine plays an important role in depicting Ondine as both real and unreal at the same time. This effect of the poem is reflected in two types of interaction between Theme I and Theme II.

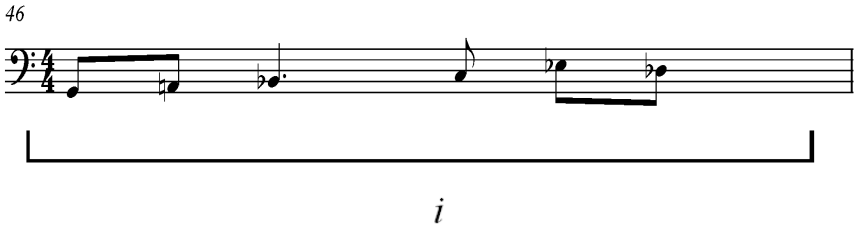
One type of interaction is that they share an important component. Theme I contains three periods which are built on one antecedent (transposed a whole tone above in the second period and transposed back in the third one) and three different consequents. Among the three consequents, the first and the third are the most closely related—the third consequent is derived from components b and d in the first consequent, while the second consequent alone contains foreign material, components e and f. One can read this as a momentary intrusion of a foreign personality that disturbs the homogeneity of Ondine's world. The transitional theme bridges Themes I and II by using both original and derivative material: the first appearance of component g (the only other time it appears is in the transitional theme of the recapitulation) is followed by two free developments on component b. Theme II first appears in m. 33-37

and is immediately restated in octaves without added material. After the initial statement of the new antecedent (h), the bulk of this theme is a recapitulation of component e, the foreign material in Theme I. Thus the two themes become inseparable through sharing component e.




Example 1.1

Another type of interaction happens when Theme I and Theme II are combined to create new material. Two major events are happening in the development section (m. 43-66): the two themes alternate to push the music towards its climax, and in the middle of the alteration emerges a new motif i, first appearing in m. 46 and later underlying the most virtuosic section (m. 58- 66) of this piece:




Example 1.2

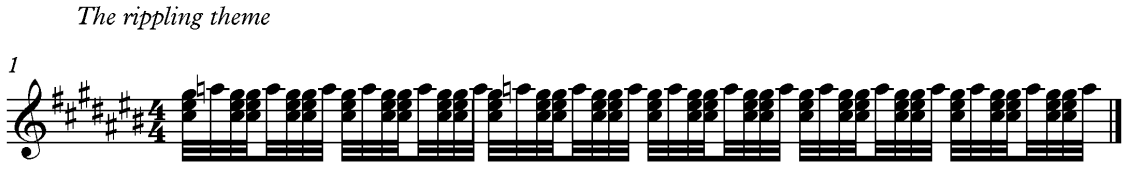
This motif may not look familiar on its own, but traced back to the second consequent of Theme I, it is in fact a development on component f—it has the same rhythmic pattern as well as the same rising and falling shape as f. Why is f significant? Notice that it draws from both c and e—the former is an exclusive component of Theme I, and the latter is the foreign component of Theme I, which participates in creating Theme II. Thus this new motif really is a combination of Theme I and II. As intensity builds up in m. 58-66, depiction of Ondine and her surroundings also becomes increasingly frantic and fantastic in stanzas 2-3 of the poem. The two themes are entangled in this new motif at the peak of Ondine's activities. Furthermore, motif i enters precisely at the moment when all seven sharps are cancelled, thus relating C major to the narrator's fantasy, and C# major is not restored until the very end of the piece.

The interactions between Theme I and Theme II mirror our observation in the poem that Ondine may not exist without the man's perception of her, which puts Ondine's existence in question.

(2) The water element
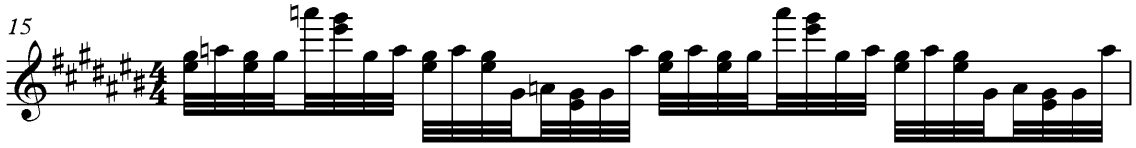
In Bertrand's poem, Ondine and water are basically inseparable: Ondine lives in water and water *is* Ondine. In Ravel's music, the whole accompaniment part in Ravel's "*Ondine*" can be read as the water element of the story. The accompaniment contributes to blur the reality and the imagination in the following two ways.

First of all, we can identify a rippling pattern, visually and aurally, that is prevalent in the writing of the accompaniment (Example 1.3):




Example 1.3

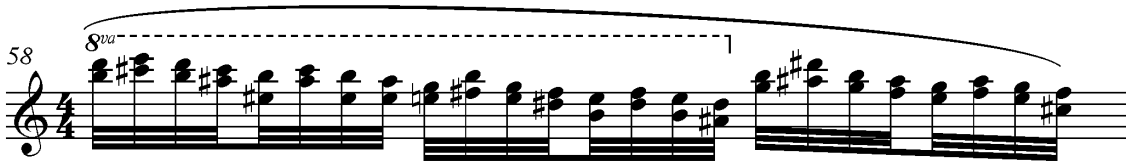
The overall effect resembles a trill on the G# (the 5th of the C# major triad), but it differs from a regular trill in that it contains successive repetitions of the principal note (in this case, the C# major triad as well). The result is that in any two adjacent groups of four 32nd notes, the C# major triad is repeated at a different position, being alternatively the last two and the middle two 32nd notes. This can be interpreted as the irregularity associated with Ondine: the whim and the playfulness in her personality. As Theme I becomes more animated through the arpeggiated octaves in m. 15 and 16, the irregularity in the accompaniment also increases: Now the repeated G#'s happen on three different octaves (Example 1.4):




Example 1.4

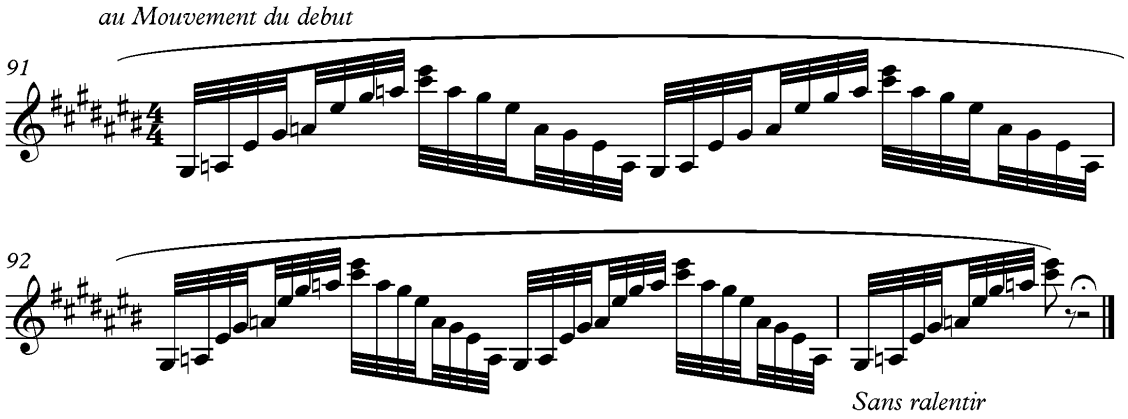
At the same time, there is an inherent order in this pattern. If we take any group of eight 32nd notes from the first example, the rippling pattern can be reproduced in a regular and predictable manner. The same statement is true in the second example if we take sixteen 32nd notes at a time. This shows that regularity is also embedded in the character of Ondine—her whim and playfulness can only go as far as the man's imagination.

Second, the accompaniment as a whole undergoes significant metamorphosis throughout the piece. Dominating most part of the exposition, the rippling pattern gives way to the descending chromatic sequence in the section m. of m. 58-66 as the music builds up to its peak (Example 1.5):




Example 1.5

Briefly restored in the recapitulation, the rippling pattern is eventually replaced by the more rhythmically stable arpeggios (Example 1.6). The distinct melodic line has disappeared and Ondine has completely merged with the water. After the only absence of accompaniment in the whole piece in m. 85- m. 88, the section marked "*rapide et brilliant*" and "*fortissimo*" bursts out of nowhere, resembling Ondine's "*éclat de rire*" in the last stanza of the poem.




Example 1.6

Ripples under Ondine's spell are replaced by splashes of water that she stirs. What happens after Ondine disappears? Bertrand's poem stops here, but Ravel added an epilogue in m. 91-93. After Ondine disappears, the water is back to rippling—but an ordered one. The repetitive arpeggios executed "*bien égal de sonorité*" delineate a peaceful lake that is no longer influenced by human emotion, reminding us of the "*beau lac endormi*" in the first stanza. As nature calms down and gradually restores its tranquility, the man should be awakening from his fantasy as well. If he finally awakes, the ambiguity over whether Ondine exists in reality or only his imagination will disappear. But the readers will never know. With the indication "*sans ralentir*", the arpeggios evaporate and Ravel brings this piece to a most unexpected closure, as if "*le temps s'est arrêté*" (Messiaen 38). Time freezes the moment before the man might have woken up, and the boundary between reality and imagination remains a mystery.

## 2. Le Gibet

*Que vois-je remuer autour de ce gibet ?*

FAUST

*Ah ! ce que j'entends, serait-ce la bise nocturne qui glapit, ou le pendu qui pousse un soupir sur la fourche patibulaire ?*

*Serait-ce quelque grillon qui chante tapi dans la mousse et le lierre stérile dont par pitié se chausse le bois ?*

*Serait-ce quelque mouche en chasse sonnant du cor autour de ces oreilles sourdes à la fanfare des hallali ?*

*Serait-ce quelque escarbot qui cueille en son vol inégal un cheveu sanglant à son crâne chauve ?*

*Ou bien serait-ce quelque araignée qui brode une demi-aune de mousseline pour cravate à ce col étranglé ?*

*C'est la cloche qui tinte aux murs d'une ville, sous l'horizon, et la carcasse d'un pendu que rougit le soleil couchant* (Bertrand, 241-242).

What do I see around the gallows?

Faust.

Ah! Might what I hear be the nocturnal breeze that screeches, or the hanged man who sighs on the fork of the gallows?

Might it be some cricket that sings, crouched in the moss and the infertile ivy in which out of pity the wood shoes itself?

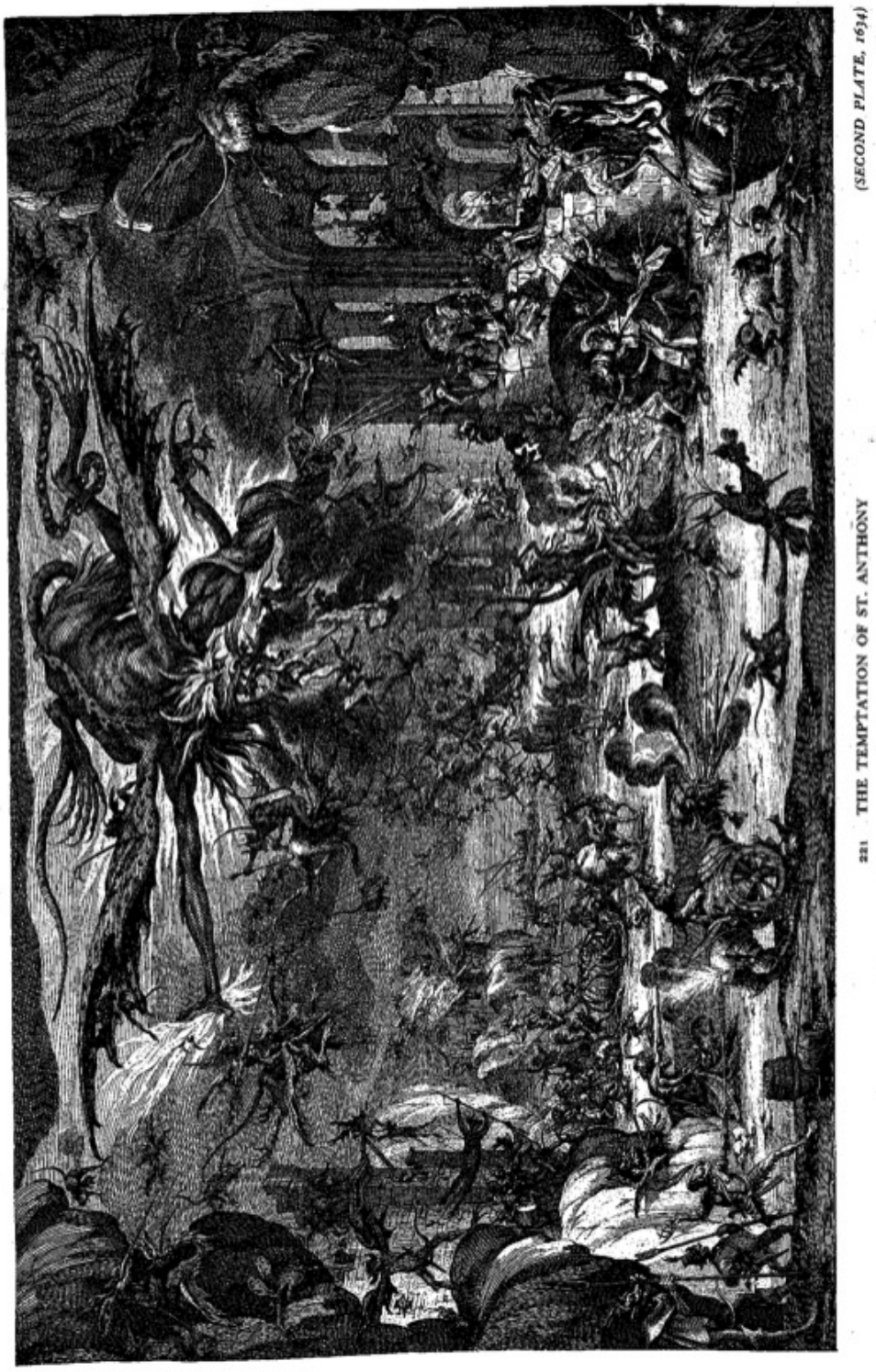
Might it be some hunting fly, sounding its horn around those ears that are deaf to the fanfares of the hallali?

> Might it be some beetle that in its uneven flight plucks bloody hair off his bald skull?
>
> Or might it be some spider that crochets half a yard of muslin as a neck scarf for this strangled neck?
>
> It is the clock that chimes on the walls of a city below the horizon, and the corpse of a hanged man whom the setting sun reddens (Bruhn 193).

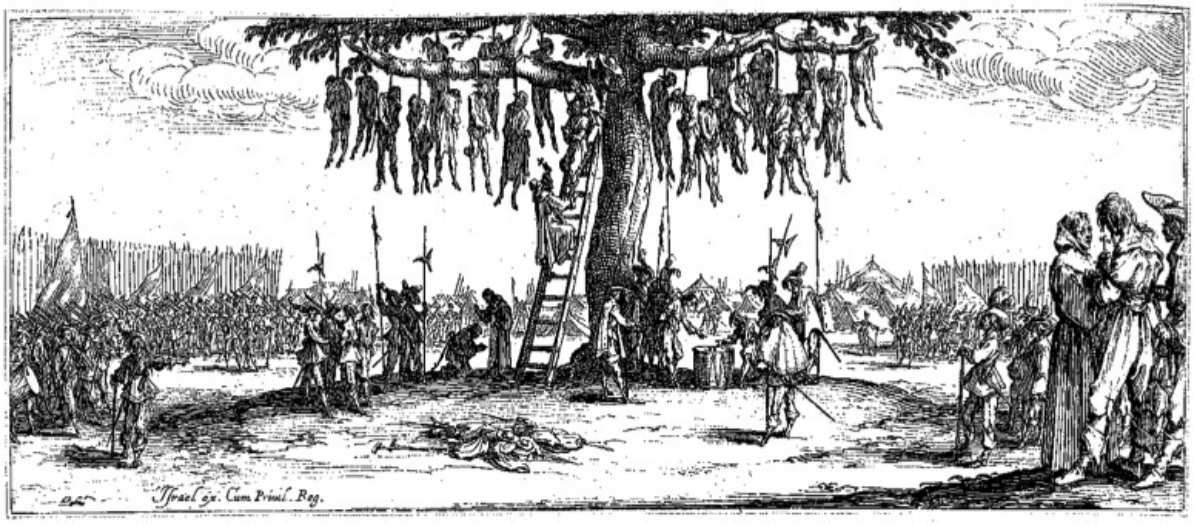
One of the last poems in the collection, "*Le Gibet*" stands out for its depiction of terror, brutality and the grotesque. One cannot help but think about the influence of Jacques Callot, to whom Bertrand pays homage in the subtitle of the collection. One of the most important baroque print masters, Callot spent most of his career in the court of the Duchy of Lorraine, but his prints and his reputation were widely spread in Europe. Among his many collectors was the great Rembrandt, of whom Bertrand was also very fond. According to Dr. Otto Benesch, director of Albertina at Vienna, "Without Callot, Rembrandt's early style of drawing and etching is unthinkable" (qtd. Bechtel 5).

Apart from painters and etchers, many writers also drew inspiration from Callot's works. Edwin de T. Bechtel lists a few examples:

> Goethe mentions him; his great collection of drawings at Weimar included a Callot study of a beggar. Sir Walter Scott refers to his work in a letter in Lockhart's biography. The popular German romanticist, E.T.A. Hoffman, described his novel, Prinzessin Brambilla, as a 'Capriccio in the manner of Callot.' He also appropriated eight etchings of the Balli set for illustrations and called his four columns of tales *Die Fantasiestuche in Callots Manier*. (Bechtel 6)




Example 2.1



**216 THE GREAT MISERIES OF WAR**

Example 2.2




**220 THE PUNISHMENTS**

Example 2.3

Bechtel also mentions Callot's influence on music, notably on Gustav Mahler:

> With the same poetic licence and imagination, Gustav Mahler composed a 'Dead March in Callot's manner' in the fourth movement of his Symphony in d major, No. 1. Perhaps Mahler, in this ironic, macabre music, had in mind Callot's Temptation of St. Anthony [Example 2.1, Bechtel Print 221], where devils burlesque the playing of many musical instruments. (Bechtel 6)

It is possible that Bertrand had in mind the cruel reality of death on the gallows depicted in Callot's *The Miseries of War* and *The Punishments* (Examples 2.2 and 2.3, Bechtel Prints 216 and 220) when he was writing "*Le Gibet*." The narrator of the poem, however, undergoes a process of questioning and suppressing this reality before its confirmation, which marks reality's victory over the narrator's imagination.

(1) Reality recognized and questioned

The prologue to this poem consists of a single question: "*que vois-je remuer autour de ce gibet?*" The narrator's focus is on his visual perception—"*vois-je*" and something must be troubling him in what he is seeing. The "*gibet*" itself, as an object that evokes death, is already hard to look upon; moreover, the verb *remuer* suggests that there are still tiny movements on this death scene, which makes the scene more eerie than utter stillness.

One line later, however, the narrator completely evades his original question and shifts attention to auditory perception—"*j'entends*." This sudden change of focus is all too suspicious in view of the eeriness of what the narrator may have seen. Right away, he raises another question about what he is hearing: "*serait-ce la bise nocturne qui glapit, ou le pendu aui pousse un soupir sur la fourche patibulaire?*" This new question, hastily raised,

juxtaposes two possible versions of reality: the nocturnal breeze and the hanged man's last breath. According to Olivier Messiaen, the *fourches patibulaires* are "*poutres en forme de fourche* ***Y*** *où l'on pendait les condamnés*" and the *gibet* is the "*ensemble de ces fourches*." Thus the narrator knows very well that the second version of the hanged man, a much more specific and elaborate "guess," is what he really sees. This quick shift of attention and the change of verb tense from the present (*vois-je*) to the hypothetical conditional (*serait-ce*) both point to the beginning of the narrator's effort to suppress the gruesome reality.

(2) Reality suppressed, imagination takes over

The progression from stanza two to stanza five is driven by the narrator's imagination to suppress the reality and the inevitable resurgence of the reality from the narrator's subconscious.

Every stanza is a question introduced by the conditional *serai-ce*. In the second stanza, the narrator's speculation for the source of the sound is "*quelque grillon qui chante*." Where is it singing? Its stage of performance is a strange mixture of life and death. On the one hand, the cricket is crouched in "*la mousse*," a humble life form that can grasp even the tiniest chance to thrive in the most brutal condition, which often serves as a metaphor for tenacious life. Here, the moss is growing on the wooden gallows, implying that it is stealing a breath from death. On the other hand, the cricket also finds itself in "*le lierre stérile*," the lifelessness of which is only accompanied by the pathetic picture of the wooden gallows trampling over it. The irony of the expression "*par pitié*" adds to the ruthlessness of the gallows. The sterile ivy hence signifies the triumph of death over life. Together, the two

seemingly contradictory images create a metaphor for the hanged man's last struggle with death.

In the third stanza, the narrator gives a new speculation for the source of the sound: "*quelque mouche en chasse sonnant du cor*." This time, the insect is intruding into the hanged man's personal space while sounding its horn "*autour de ces oreilles*." The description "*ces oreilles sourdes à la fanfare des hallali*" has a rather intriguing double meaning. On the one hand, if we divide the sentence after "*ces oreilles*," "*sourdre à quelque chose"* is a fixed expression for being indifferent to something, so it would mean that the man is indifferent to the sound of the horn. If we take "*ces oreilles sourdes*" as one unit, however, it would mean that the man is literality deaf, and he cannot hear "*la fanfare des hallalis*," a loud noise that Messiaen explained as the "*sonnerie de cor qui annonce que le cerf est aux abois*" (Messiaen 39). The fact that the man cannot hear the loud horn creates an uneasy atmosphere, and the absence of any sign of life in this stanza increases the possibility of death.

In the next two stanzas, the insects become more and more daring and start to make physical contact with the man. Is it a beetle that picks a strand of hair from the man's bald head or a spider that embroiders a necktie for his strangled neck? The interactions between the insects and the man are no less than disturbing. The beetle's flight is described as "*intégral*"; picking a hair from a bald head is to say the least impossible, but also "epitomizes the complete loss of dignity, the intrusiveness of the world upon one for whom physical punishment is not yet cruel enough" (Bruhn 194); a spider making a neck tie for a hanged man is not only absurd, but implies an audacious mockery of the exact manner of the man's

death, a derision that a man alive would not tolerate from a petty insect. As all signs of life died down in the previous stanza, the picture of death becomes clear in words such as "*sanglant*" and "*étranglé*."

(3) Reality re-surfaces
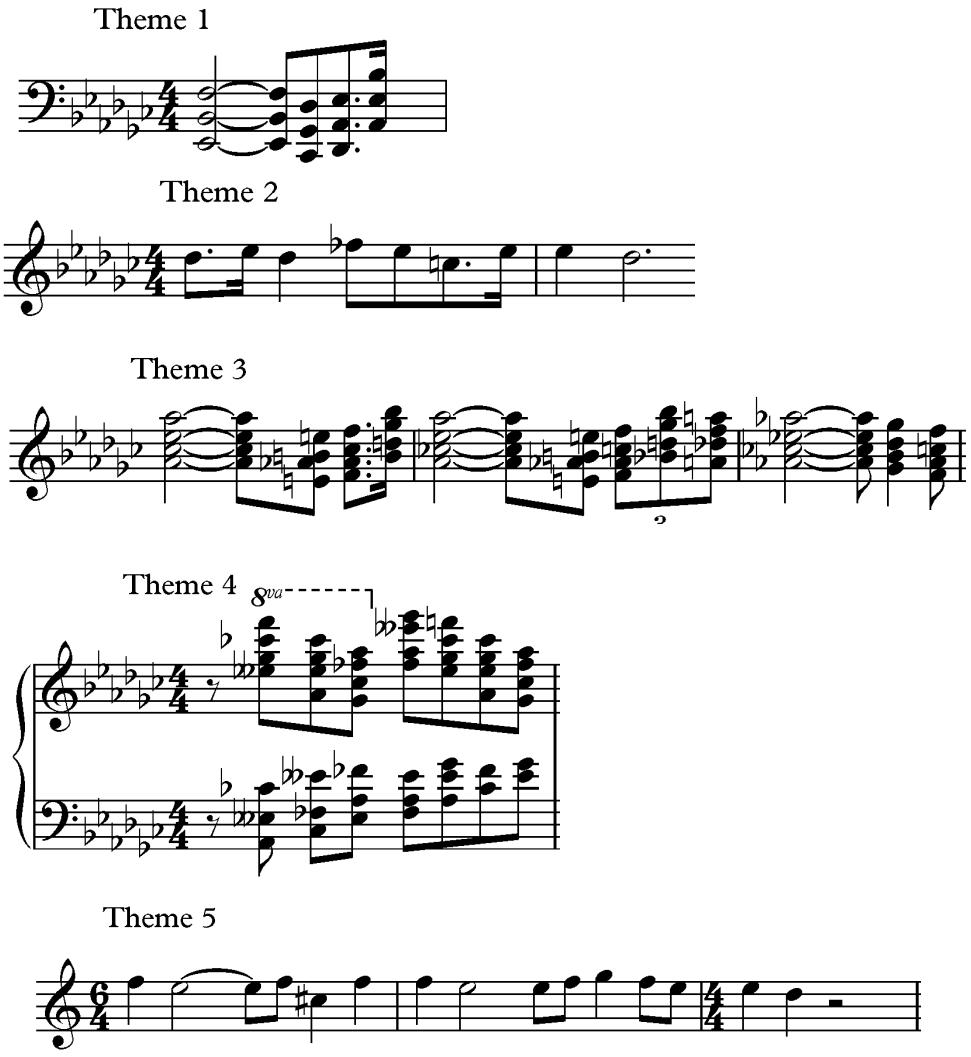
Under Bertrand's pen, the imagination of the narrator, carried out by *quelques* (the usage of which implies uncertainty, pointing to the realm of imagination) insects with increasingly intruding activities, moves progressively and inevitably towards the death of the man. The narrator's effort to suppress that reality is only futile. Finally, in the last stanza, the change of article from "*le pendu*" to "*un pendu*" is a depersonalization that marks the end of the man's life and the narrator has to recognize the death of the man with both visual and auditory perceptions. What he hears is the bell (the death toll) that rings on the city wall from afar, and what he sees is unmistakably the corpse of a hanged man. It is clear that reality has triumphed over imagination.

*

As we have analyzed, the poem features different layers of relationship between reality and imagination: reality under imagination, progression from imagination to reality, cycle that starts and ends with reality while passing through imagination. Ravel's "*Le Gibet*," as we shall see, displays these three layers in its thematic scheme, the Bb ostinato and its harmonic scheme.

(1) The thematic scheme

As stated in the introduction, Bertrand and Ravel shared a preference for carefully constructed forms. In Bertrand's poem, the sense of form dwells in the recognition, suppression and resurgence that reality undergoes. In Ravel's music, the structure is shaped by the organization of the thematic materials. Below are the motifs of all themes in the order of their first appearances:




Example 2.4
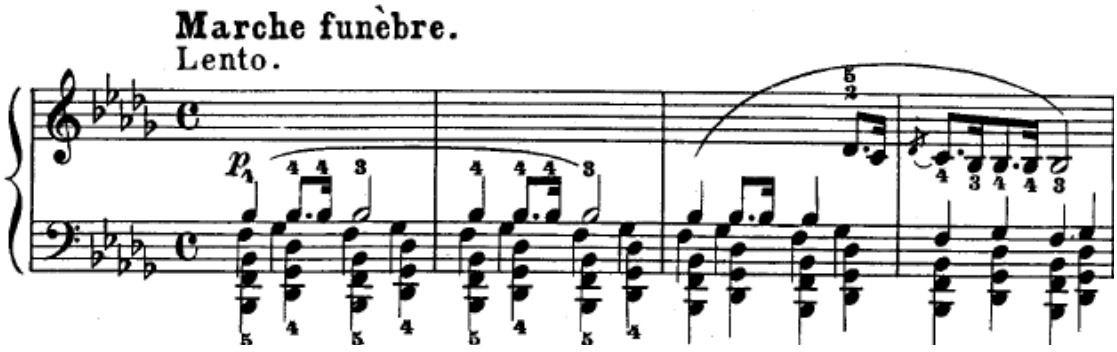
Theme 1 in m. 3-5 is followed by Theme 2 in m.6-7. Both themes are immediately restated with variations—Theme 1 is truncated to half of its original length, and Theme 2 is doubled with a major third above. Theme 3 first appears in m. 12-13 and is transposed up a perfect fourth in m. 17-19 after a short pause. The three themes are all related in certain ways (much like the interactions between the themes in "*Ondine*"): Theme 1 and Theme 2 share the motif of a dotted eight note plus a semiquaver, while Theme 3 is a development on Theme 1, notably with the added triplet. Theme 4 (m. 20-22) sets off a contrary motion towards the middle register and is repeated in m. 23-25. After Theme 5 (m. 28-34), the longest of all the themes, Ravel starts bringing back the previously exposed materials. First comes Theme 3 in m. 35-36 with an extension in m.37-39. It is followed by Theme 4 in two fragments, m. 41-42 and m. 44-45, and eventually, in m. 49-51, the opening Theme 1 is brought back as the closing theme.

Despite the recapitulation of Themes 3 and 4 in their original order and the omission of Theme 2, the retrograde path that Ravel built to come back to Theme 1 is significant enough to be read as a an echo of Bertrand's form: set up by Themes 3 and 4, the return of Theme 1 is as inevitable as the resurgence of reality.

(2) The tolling bells—symbolic meaning of the Bb ostinato

Ravel was not reported to be a Callot admirer, but the tension and terror in Bertrand's poem can be easily found in Poe's writings, of which Ravel was deeply fond. In particular, since "*Entre cloche* (Among bells; for two pianos), in which the tintinnabulation of bells reflects Poe's spiritual influence, […] Ravel's fascination with bells, clocks and chimes
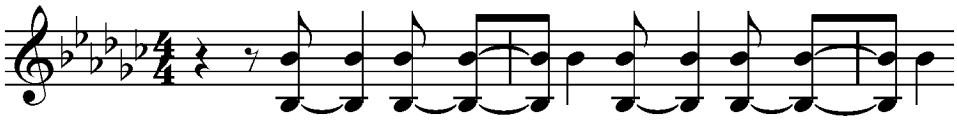
would extend throughout his career." (Orenstein 22) "*La cloche qui tinte*" in "*Le Gibe*" provides him with a perfect opportunity to fully exploit the expressive power of the musical representation of bells, in this case the Bb ostinato that rings throughout the piece. The fact that it is omnipresent can be interpreted as the underlying reality of death that the narrator tries to suppress but was nonetheless unable to ignore. The listener may also recall the Bb's in Chopin's *Funeral March*, the third movement of his *Sonata No.2, Op. 35 in Bb minor* (Example 2.5):




Example 2.5

The association with the *Funeral March* adds a macabre quality to the Bb's in "*Le Gibet*."
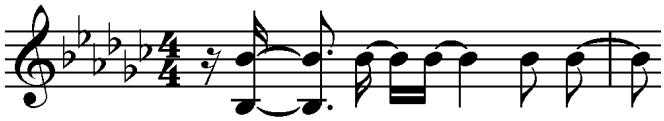
Furthermore, the patterns of the Bb ostinato correspond to the narrative structure of Bertrand. The initial pattern is the following:



Example2.6
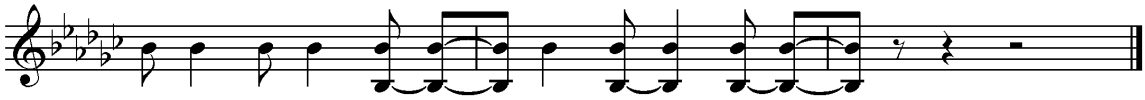
It is both regular and irregular. On the one hand, the rhythmic cell of a quarter note followed by two dotted quarter notes is established throughout m. 1-14, alluding to the objective, unchangeable reality. On the other hand, the pattern varies when it strives to be heard under

the melody. For example in m. 20, we can observe the added sixteenth notes that make a distinction between the Bb's and the melody:



Example 2.7

This distortion of the original pattern can be read as a distortion of the reality when the narrator's imagination intrudes. From m. 28-34, the initial pattern is hardly recognizable because of the frequent changes in meter and the variable number of dotted quarter notes in between two quarter notes. This instability coincides with the turning point of the thematic scheme—Theme 5. When the recapitulation of previous themes is underway, the pattern is gradually restored to its initial state, and in m. 47, fully re-established. Reading the pattern backwards from the very end of the piece, we can make an interesting observation:



Example 2.8

It is the retrograde version of the beginning! Thus the end of the Bb ostinato mirrors the beginning, just as the last verse in Bertrand's poem answers the questions raised in the first.

(3) The harmonic scheme

By efforts of Wagner, Strauss, Debussy, etc., experiments to extend tonality were already under the way in the late 19th Century; in "*Le Gibet*," Ravel pushes tonality almost to its breaking point.

The key signature at the beginning of this piece suggests Gb major or Eb minor, and repetitive appearances of Eb at strategic places (the low Eb at every entrance of Theme I, and the Eb pedal in m. 17-19 among others) implies that Eb may be a tonal center. At the same time, the Bb ostinato underlying the entire piece seems to suggest Bb as a tonal center. This struggle between Eb and Bb is set as an important harmonic event as soon as the first chord of Theme I is struck. The quintal chord Eb-Bb-F includes two pairs of possible tonic-dominant relationships. The middle Bb can be either the dominant of the Eb below or the tonic of F above. The third—Gb for Eb or Db for Bb—that is essential to create a sense of tonality is intentionally left out by Ravel. Although Gb and Db both appear later in m. 3, Ravel took preventive measures against every possible scenario where these two notes might meet their respective tonics. First, the parallel motion of the chord members in this theme effectively prevents Gb and Db from stacking upon Eb and Bb. Furthermore, the two Db's in this theme are truck exactly when the Bb is held over, thus reducing, to the smallest degree, the impression of a Bb tonic created by the simultaneous sounding of Db and Bb. Another technique that Ravel uses to prolong the tonal ambiguity is to introduce Fb. A semitone above Eb and below the dominant of Bb, Fb makes all seven notes flatted, resisting the identification of either Eb or Bb as center. Starting from Theme 2 in m. 6 , Fb is used extensively throughout the piece. An attempt to clarify the tonal center starts in m. 35, the return of Theme 3, where we have a clear Eb minor chord at the upper register with Gb as the third. However, the low C pedal, reminiscent of the all seven naturals in the previous section (m. 28-34), transforms the Eb minor chord into a half diminished seventh chord with root C, which is in the pre-dominant area of Bb, so that the first clearly defined Eb minor chord

ironically becomes the beginning of movement towards tonal references of Bb. In m. 42-44, Ravel adds a Db ostinato to the Bb ostinato, thus emphasizing the long-awaited third above Bb. The Fb also finds a way to reconcile with Bb: the falling by half step from Fb to Db in m. 46-49 is followed by two measures of confirmation of Db as the final destination of Fb. In m. 48-50, the impression of Bb as a tonal center is reinforced in the melodic minor third Dd-Bb. With the Bb ostinato sounding alone, the piece ends the way it starts.

Thus the harmonic scheme of this piece is also a metaphor for the narrator's psychological development. The isolated Bb's flat at the beginning is the reality that the narrator perceives, and it is immediately questioned by the Eb that joins in, which stands for the narrator's imagination. However, Bb stubbornly rings out in the background, just like the reality that the narrator can suppress but not deny. In m. 35, the complete Eb minor chord ironically becomes the beginning of the consolidation of Bb, corresponding to the inevitable meeting of imagination and reality in Bertrand. At the very end, the Bb—the reality, is the only thing that the Bertrand's narrator can grasp.

## 3. Scarbo

*Il regarda sous le lit, dans la cheminée, dans le bahut – personne. Il ne put comprendre par où il s'était introduit, pa où il s'était évadé.*

HOFFMANN, *Contes nocturnes*

*Oh! Que de fois je l'ai entendu et vu, Scarbo, lorsqu'à minuit la lune brille dans le ciel comme un écu d'argent sur une bannière d'azur semée d'abeilles d'or !*

*Que de fois j'ai entendu bourdonner son rire dans l'ombre de mon alcôve, et grincer son ongle sur la soie des courtines de mon lit ?*

*Que de fois j'ai l'ai vu descendre du plancher, pirouetter sur un pied et rouler par la chambre comme le fuseau tombé de la quenouille d'une sorcière.*

*Le croyais-je alors évanoui? Le nain grandissait entre la lune et moi, comme le clocher d'une cathédrale gothique, un grelot d'or en branle à son bonnet pointu !*

*Mais bientôt son corps bleuissait, diaphane comme la cire d'une bougie, son visage blêmissait comme la cire d'un lumignon, - et soudain il s'éteignait.*[8]

*

He looked under the bed, up the chimney, in the chest; nobody. He could not understand from where he had entered, or where he had escaped.

HOFFMAN, *Contes nocturnes*

[8] Bertrand

O! How many times have I heard and seen him, Scarbo, when at midnight the moon shines in the sky like a silver crown on a blue banner emblazoned with golden bees!

How many times have I heard his laughter resound in the shadow of my alcove, heard his claw scrape on the silk of my bed curtains!

How many times have I seen him come down from the floor, pirouette on one foot and roll around the room like the fallen spindle of a sorceress's distaff!

Did I then believe him vanished? The dwarf grew tall between the moon and me like the belfry of a Gothic cathedral, a golden bell swinging on its pointed cap!

But soon his body turned blue, diaphanous like the wax of a candle, his face grew pal like the wax of a candle stub—and suddenly he expired. (Bruhn, 205)

Who is Scarbo, the creature Bertrand mentions several times in *Gaspard de la Nuit*[9] and to whom dedicates two poems? As a principal character in the third volume of the collection, *La Nuit et ses prestiges*, Scarbo is depicted as a diabolic gnome that haunts the narrator during the night. A gnome, as explained by Messiaen, "est un nain difforme et surnaturel, qui, d'après les calibalistes juifs, habite le sein de la tèrre, où il garde des trésors" (Messiaen, 50). Already in this definition, the character Scarbo possesses a mixture of natural and supernatural qualities. Some prints by Callot (Examples 3.1 and 3.2, Bechtel Prints 115 and 116) might also have served as an inspiration for Bertrand's of conception of Scarbo. In the analysis below, we will see more closely how Bertrand combines reality and imagination

[9] In *La Nuit et ses prestiges*: "*La chamber gotique*," *"Scarbo*," "*Le Fou*," and "*Le Nain;"* In *Pièces détachées*: "*Scarbo"*

in the second *Scarbo* of his collection, the one that Ravel has chosen, with references from other poems where Scarbo also appears.



Example 3.1 (Prints 115 and 116)

(1) Persuasion and self-persuasion

The poem starts from the disappearance of Scarbo, when the narrator anxiously looks for traces of the gnome and is confused by to where he has gone. Why would the narrator be so eager to find a creature that has brought him terrifying experiences? This urgency stems from a strong desire to persuade both the reader and himself that Scarbo really exists. The change from third-person to first-person narration suggests that the narrator is possibly talking to the readers directly in the main body of the poem, where the repetitions of "*que de fois*" are followed by perceptual "proofs" of Scarbo's existence on which the narrator hopes to cling. It is also possible, while reading the first three stanzas, to read the "*que de fois*" as the narrator's inner activties—he is pondering over the reasons to believe in his own senses. In either case, the repeated "*que de fois*" speaks of a desire towards reasoning, which belongs to the realm of reality.

(2) Perception invaded by imagination

However, the narrator's reasoning can hardly stand. In the first stanza, Bertrand gives a description of the backdrop for Scarbo's visit:

> *Oh! Que de fois je l'ai entendu et vu, Scarbo, lorsqu'à minuit la lune brille dans le ciel comme un écus d'argent sur une bannière d'azur semée d'abeilles d'or !*

In the narrator's eye, the moon resembles a silver coin[10], the sky a blue banner and the stars golden bees. If the silver coin passes as a conventional metaphor for the moon, the blue banner sown with golden bees is a highly personalized view, quite different from the usual

[10] Medieval coin

lovely starry night (and in a different manner from "*Ondine*"). The idea itself of bees sown onto a banner is no less scary than bizarre, evoking the fantastic or even delirious atmosphere of Van Gogh's *Starry Night*. Thus the narrator's gaze into the night provides us with a look into his inner world: he enters a state of nervousness and excitement precisely at the hour of Scarbo's arrival, and the use of metaphoric language as Scabo enters the scene calls into question the reliability of the narrator's perception.

The moon also plays a significant role. In four out of the five poems that feature Scarbo, the moon is present and reveals the narrator's state of mind. In *La chambre gothique*, the moon is associated with the narrator's impression of the sky:

> *— "Oh ! la terre, —murmurai-je à la nuit, — est un calice embaumé dont le pistil et les étamines sont la lune et les étoiles !"* ("*La chambre gothique"*)

In a metaphoric language similar to the one at the beginning of *Scarbo*, the moon takes part in the narrator's vivid fantasy of the nightly sky before he falls asleep. In *Le Fou*, the moon is associated with the narrator's impression of Scarbo :

> *La lune peignait ses cheveux avec un démêloir d'ébène qui argentait d'une pluie de vers luisants les collines, les prés et les bois.* ("*Le Fou"*)

The narrator sees Scarbo through the personification of the moon, who paints the gnome's hair silver with a dark comb. In both examples, the moon serves as a channel for the narrator to project his mental image onto what he perceives. Using the moon as a medium of perception is not a fortuitous choice. Although the idea that the full moon makes people insane is an outdated one, there has been a long tradition in art to associate the moon with insanity. An example is Schoenberg's song cycle *Pierrot Lunaire* set to Albert Giraud's

poems, where "*lunaire*" suggests that Pierrot, the narrator in this work, is both "related to the moon" and "lunatic". Likewise, the moon in Bertrand symbolized the narrator's fanciful outlook on his surroundings.

The narrator's tendency towards fantasy is also reflected in the metaphor of *fuseau*, for which Bertrand has a predilection and uses twice:

> *Mais le nain, pendu à sa fuite hennissante, se roulait comme un fuseau dans les quenouillées de sa blanche crinière. ("Le Nain")*

> *Que de fois je l'ai vu descendre du plancher, pirouetter sur un pied et rouler par la chambre comme le fuseau tombé de la quenouille d'une sorcière. (" Scarbo"* in *Pièces détachées)*

The most widely know *fuseau* in French literature is probably the one in *La Belle au bois dormant* by Charles Perrault, the spindle that the princess touches and falls asleep under the old fairy's magic. It is possible that Bertrand is making a reference to this story, an important contribution that Perrault made to the establishment of fairy tale as a literary genre. As fairy tale and witchcraft are a creations of human imagiantion, this reference to *La Belle au bois dormant* emphasizes the narrator's imaginative ability.

(3) Appearance, disappearance and infinite loop

Under Bertrand's pen, Scarbo always appears at night—more precisely, at midnight:

> *Encore, — si ce n'était à minuit, — l'heure blasonnée de dragons et diables ! — que le gnome qui se soûle de ma lampe!* (*La chambre gothique, 133*)

> *Oh! Que de fois je l'ai entendu et vu, Scarbo, lorsqu'à minuit la lune brille dans le ciel comme un écus d'argent sur une bannière d'azur semée d'abeilles d'or ! (Scarbo, 243)*

Around midnight, the narrator starts to have "*les yeux lourds de sommeil*"[11]. As we saw in "*Ondine*", the moment of falling asleep affects his perception of reality. Moreover, in stories of ghosts and apparitions, midnight is a conventional time when the supernatural beings start to stir. By juxtaposing Scarbo with dragons and devils, which are common fantastic creatures, Bertrand implies that Scarbo might also be a product of the narrator's imagination.

Paired with Scarbo's punctual arrival at midnight is the creature's sudden disappearance. Before slipping away, he goes through a series of transformations. He first grows as tall as the bell tower of a gothic cathedral. Then, in the last stanza, Bertrand creates a lexical field of candle—*cire, bougie, lumignon, s'éteindre*—to describe the flickering process of Scarbo vanishining from sight: first his body and his face become transparent like the wax of a candle, and then he "passed away" (the verb *s'éteindre* is usually associated with dying) as if a candle is put out. The rapid metamorphosis that Scarbo goes through and the contrast between the imposing cathedral (solid, stable) and the flickering candle flame (fragile, unstable) suggest that Scarbo's existence is both transitional and transitory, and his nature—an apparition imagined by the narrator or a real creature—is hard to grasp.

Notice that the disappearance of Scarbo sends us back to the prologue, and the narrator starts a new cycle of persuasion and self-persuasion, while continuing to be haunted by Scarbo. The reader, trapped in this infinite loop as the narrator is, will never be able to tell whether Scarbo really exists or not, and thus the fear comes not only from the creature, but also from the inability to escape one's imagination.
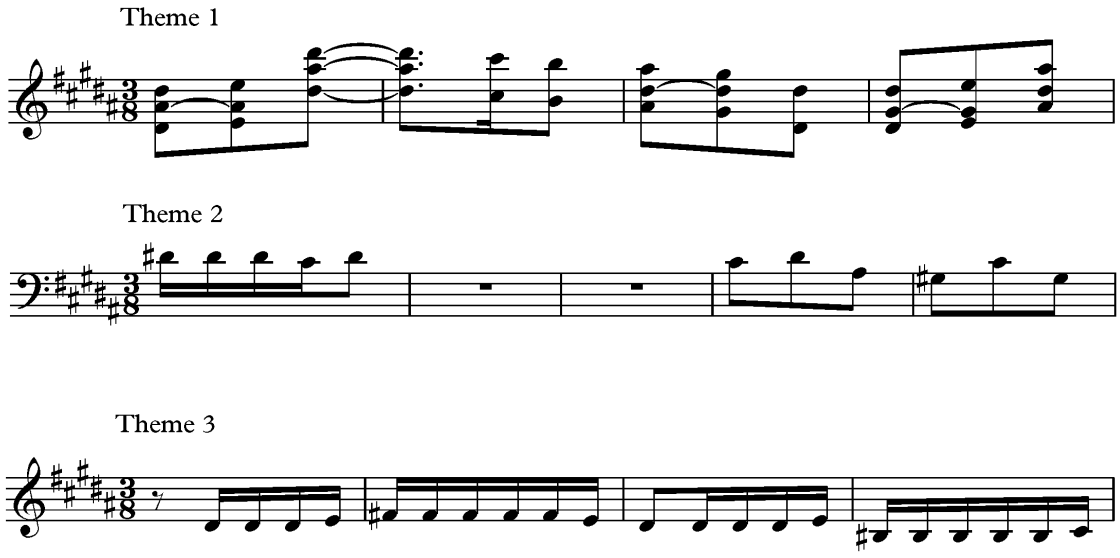
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[11]

*

In his own "*Scarbo*," Ravel captures the elusiveness of Scarbo and the narrator's cyclic in his design of the thematic and harmonic schemes, which contributes to blur the boundaries of reality and imagination.

(1) The thematic scheme
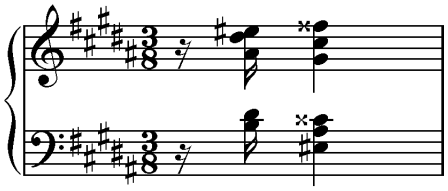
Ravel's thematic scheme mirrors the fact that Scarbo as depicted by Bertrand exists in a transitional and transitory state. At a first glance, Themes 1, 2, and 3 (Example 3.2) stand out for their short length:




Example 3.2

Theme 4 (Example 3.3), although long in its duration, is built on no more than a sixteenth note followed by an eight note:
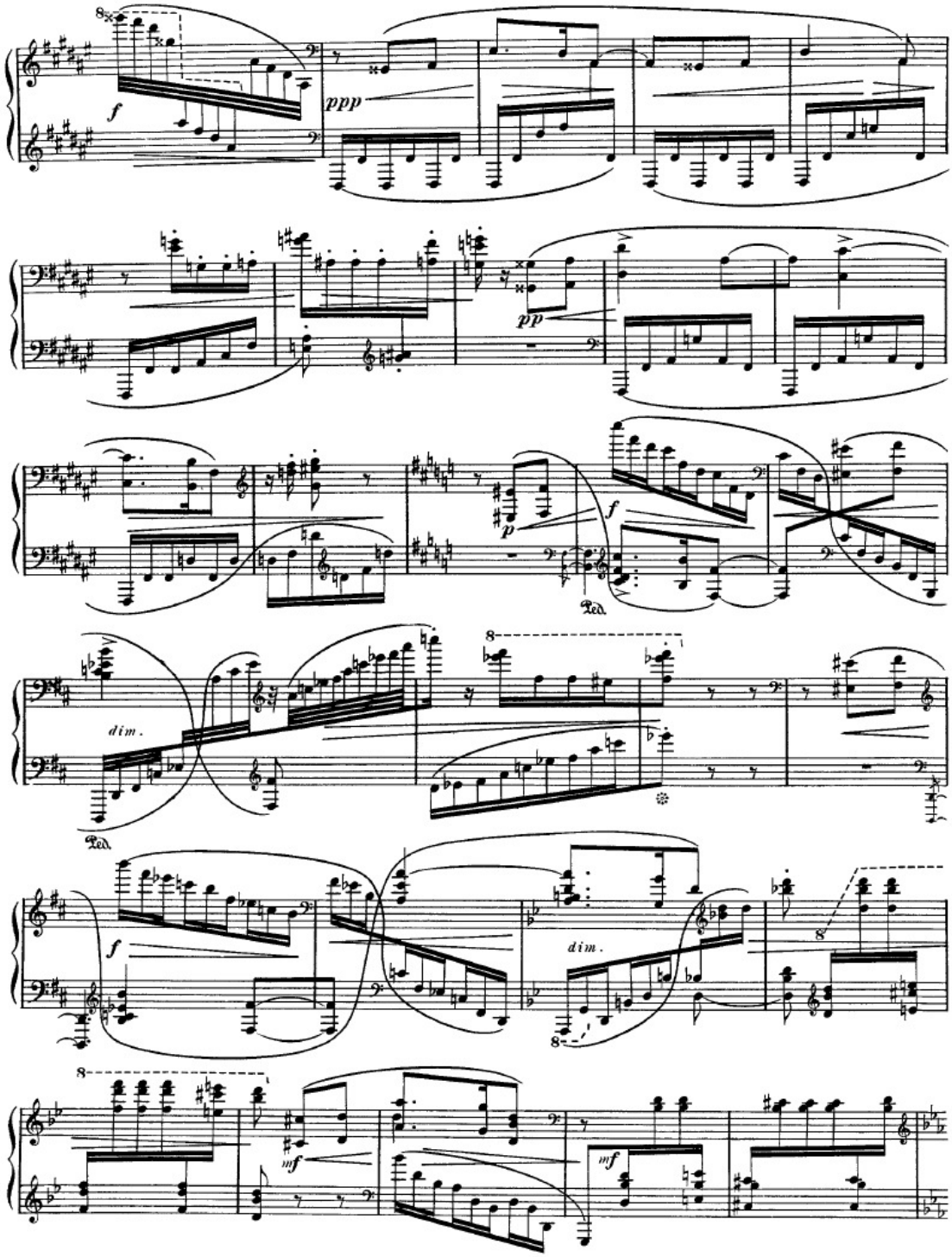
Theme 4 (motive)



Example 3.3

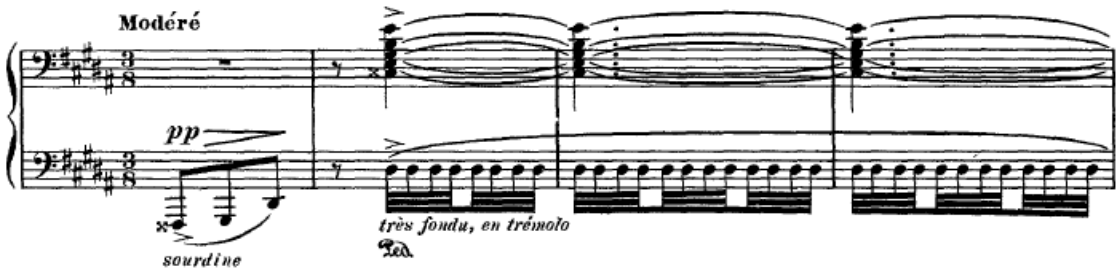
While the shortness of the thematic materials reflects Scarbo's sudden appearance and disappearance, the connection between the themes shows the gnome's rapid transformation from one state to another. Ravel links the four themes by making a montage with their fragments. This technique is most prominent in m. 314-340 (Example 3.4). A variation of Theme 1, Theme 1a (m. 314-317), is followed by a fragment of Theme 3 (m. 318-319) and just a head of Theme 4 (m. 320). Another variation on Theme 1, Theme 1b, is stated right afterwards, this time followed by the basic motif of D. The alternation between Themes 1a and 1b continues on the rest of the page, separated by Themes 3 and 4. The fast alternation between themes resembles Scarbo's rapid metamorphosis, which makes it difficult for the narrator to tell whether the gnome is real or a product of his imagination.

In addition to splicing the themes, Ravel also introduced Motifs a and b at the very beginning of the piece as a unifying tool. Let us look at the two motifs for a moment (Example 3.5). Motif a is the three eighth notes, ascending from a very low register, and motif b is the tremolo. The depth of tone and the decrescendo from an already muted *pianissimo* create a mysterious atmosphere that marks the arrival of Scarbo. The tremolo that follows resembles the shivering of the narrator at the oncoming terror. These two motifs serve as bases for themes 1,2 and 3. The wave-like Theme 1 spins out of motif 1—the first group of three eighth notes augments the second interval of motif m while the last group




Example 3.4

diminishes it. Both Theme 2 and Theme 3 feature repeated notes that can be traced to the tremolo of motif b. In addition to serving as the bases for later themes, the two motifs also have a structural significance. They appear three times: at both the beginning and the end of the piece, as well as the beginning of the recapitulation[12]. The uncompromising return to motifs a and b reminds us of the repeated "*que de fois*" in the poem, also stated three times. We can assign the three syllables to the three eighth notes of motif a, which symbolizes the never-ending terror of Scarbo and the unsuccessful reasoning that the narrator cannot escape.




Example 3.5
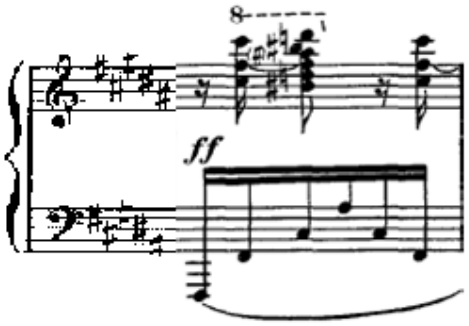
(2) The harmonic scheme

As in "*Le Gibet*," Ravel intentionally avoids defining any tonic, especially at the three climactic moments. This observation is made more significant by the importance of dramatic moments in Ravel's harmonic scheme, as Howat points out: "

> An elemental distinction between Ravel's and Debussy's tonal thinking here lies in Ravel's characteristic use of cadence (often modal) as a dramatic focus for the main culminations, as opposed to Debussy's more characteristic placing of climaxes at points of tonal crisis, letting the resolution slip in more quietly later, often under modal disguise (Howat, 36).
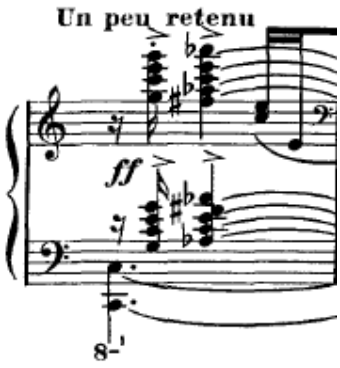
[12] According to Kaminsky's analysis, the piece is in sonata form and the recapitulation starts in m. 395.

The first climax (Example 3.6) is in m. 205:




Example 3.6
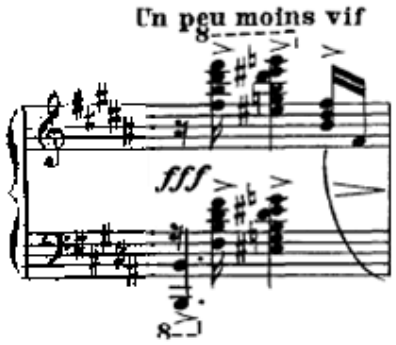
The bass, F#, is approached from the B above (m. 198) by alternating full steps and half steps, forming part of an octatonic scale. The F# is further emphasized as a potential tonal center by being sustained as a pedal until m. 227. In the upper register of m. 205, however, the C#, which is the dominant in the key of F#, is split chromatically into D and B#, defying analyzing F# as a tonic, and Ravel continues to restate the C# three times. The second climax (Example 3.7) comes in m. 366 ("*Un peu retenu*"):




Example 3.7

This time, the potential tonal center is the C in the bass, extended all the way until m. 388 as a pedal point. Ravel eschews this analysis again, by splitting its dominant G into Ab and F#

in the upper registers. The last climax (Example3.8), in m. 563, features B as the potential tonal center:




Example 3.8

As the beginning of the descending fragment of the octatonic scale that precedes the first climax, B is now the destination of a complete descending octatonic scale. Its dominant F# has been prepared in the previous page as a prominent pedal point in the bass—only to be split into G and E#!

We can make two observations based on the analysis above. First, the persistent split of the dominant mockingly escapes the realm of any tonic, just as Scarbo always escapes the narrator's grasp. Second, placing those harmonically defining (in this case, it is exactly the elusiveness of the harmony that is defined) moments at the climaxes is not only a Rravelian practice of harmony, but also a Rravelian reading of the next to last stanza in Bertrand:

> *Le croyais-je alors évanoui? Le nain grandissait entre la lune et moi, comme le clocher d'une cathédrale gothique, un grelot d'or en branle à son bonnet pointu !*

In Bertrand's poem, the moment when Scarbo grows into a real nightmare of imposing size and solid build (as the bell tower gothic cathedral) is also the start of his fading out into the thin air. From the narrator's point of view, it is also the moment when the narrator is the most

certain of Scarbo's existence, and the certainty is immediately called into doubt at Scarbo's sudden disappearance one stanza later. Thus Ravel's most dramatic moments correspond to the greatest tension between reality and imagination in the poem.

## Conclusion

In *Gaspard de la Nuit*, Bertrand and Ravel have taken us on a journey across reality and imagination. Throughout this journey, the symbiosis of reality and imagination creates a dreamland where reality is disguised by the fantastic surface of imagination, and imagination imbibes from its real psychological root. Between each poem and the piano piece composed accordingly, the relationship between reality and imagination is identical. In both Bertrand and Ravel, "*Ondine*" features an ambiguity between reality and imagination that remains obscure throughout; ambiguity is clarified at the end of "*Le Gibet,*" through the irrepressible resurfacer of reality; the struggle between reality and imagination in "*Scarbo*" enters a loop, where the narrator is forever haunted by the mysterious gnome. Ravel, as a reader, captures accurately how Bertrand treats reality and imagination.

As a creative reader, however, Ravel does not always follow the narrative program of the poems. While he sometimes pinpoints events in the same narrative order as Bertrand—notably at the end of "*Ondine*" and "*Scarbo*", where the water nymph and the gnome both evaporate into the thin air—Ravel's narrative is only loosely based on Bertrand's for the most of the time and he departs from the narrative to explore the symbolic power of music. His themes often carry extra-musical meanings, whether it is the rippling theme that underlies "*Ondine*" or the tolling bell that strikes throughout "*Le Gibet.*" In both cases, the themes are symbolic of the psychological states of the narrator, which are only implied in Bertrand but made "explicit" by Ravel. Ravel's harmonic designs can also bear symbolic meanings, such as the triumph of the B♭ in "*Le Gibet*" (triumph of reality) and the tonal

ambiguity in "*Scarbo*" (reality and imagination are never clearly defined). Furthermore, Ravel's masterly handled (and well disguised) large forms carry symbolic meanings as well. Bertrand and Ravel's common interests in form meet here. The two themes in "*Ondine*" correspond to the bipartite visual display of Bertrand's poem, while the interchangeability of motivic elements in the two themes of Ravel also corresponds to the undecidability of narrative angles in Bertrand. The form of "*Le Gibet*" represents both the progression and the return to reality, and the cyclic structure of "*Scarbo*" embodies the haunting experience.

This thesis leads to further questions. According our analysis, both Bertrand and Ravel use the narrator's perception as a way to blur the boundaries between reality and imagination. How do the musical representations of perception coincide with and differ from its poetic counterparts? What other purposes does perception serve, in addition to the treatment of reality and imagination? Another aspect worth considering is the possible implications of reality and imagination for the performer. Does the relationship between reality and imagination provide a valid interpretive angle for the pianist? If so, how does it serve as a guide for the performer's physical movements, sound production and creation of a coherent structure? These questions may lead to results that would have real impact on the interpretation of Ravel's works.

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# Appendix

## Analyse littéraire du *Gibet* d'Aloysius Bertrand

Un des derniers poème du recueil, *Le Gibet* se distingue par la terreur, la brutalité et le grotesque. On ne peut que repérer l'influence de Jacques Callot, à qui Bertrand fait hommage dans le sous-titre de la collection. Un des graveurs baroques les plus importants, Callot a passé la plupart de sa carrière à la cour du duché de Lorraine, mais ses gravures et sa réputation étaient répandus en Europe. Rembrandt faisait partie de ceux qui collectionnaient son travail, Callot l'admirait également. Selon Dr. Otto Benesch, le directeur du palais Albertina à Vienne, « sans Callot, le style de Rembrandt dans ses premiers dessins et gravures auraient été inenvisageable. »

En plus de peintres et de graveurs, des écrivains ont aussi été inspirés par Callot. Bechtel donne quelques exemples :

> Goethe le mentionne ; une étude de Callot sur un mendiant faisait partie de sa grande collection de dessins à Weimar. Sir Walter Scott fait référence à Callot dans une lettre dans la biographie de Lockhart. Le romantique allemand populaire, E.T.A Hoffmann, a appelé son roman, *Prinzessin Brambila*, un 'Cappricio dans la manière de Callot.' Il a aussi obtenu huit gravures dans la collection de Balli pour les illustrations et appelé ses contes dans *Die Fantasiestuche in Callots Manier*.

Bechtel mentionne aussi l'influence de Callot sur la musique, surtout Gustave Mahler :

> Avec la mème liberté et imagination poétiques, Gustave Mahler a composé une *Todtenmarsche in Callots Manier* dans le quatrième mouvement de sa *Symphonie en re majeur, n°1*. Peut-être que Mahler,

dans ce morceau ironique et macabre, pensait à *La Tentation de saint Antoine* de Callot, dans laquelle les diables ridiculisent de nombreux instruments de musique.

Il est possible que Bertrand pense à réalité cruelle d'être pendu sur le gibet que décrit Callot dans *Les Grandes Misères de la guerre* et *Les Châtiments*. Pourtant le narrateur dans le poème *Le Gibet* remet la réalité en question et la refoule avant de la confirmer.

(1) La Réalité reconnue et mise en question

Le prologue à ce poème est une question : « que vois-je autour de ce gibet ? » Le narrateur se concentre sur la perception visuelle—« vois-je », et il est évidemment troublé par ce qu'il voit. Le gibet, en tant qu'objet qui évoque la mort, n'est pas une vue agréable. De plus, le mot « remuer » suggère qu'il y a toujours des mouvements sur la scène de la mort, ce qui rend la scène plus inquiétante que l'immobilité totale.

Pourtant, une ligne après, le narrateur évite complètement sa question originelle et se tourne vers la perception auditive—« j'entends. » Ce changement brusque est assez douteux à cause de la terreur que le narrateur aurait pu ressentir. Il pose immédiatement une question au sujet de ce qu'il entend : « serait-ce la bise nocturne qui glapit, ou le pendu qui pousse un soupir sur la fourche patibulaire? » Cette nouvelle question que pose le narrateur hâtivement juxtapose deux versions possibles de la réalité : la brise nocturne et le dernier souffle du pendu. D'après Messiaen, les « fourches patibulaires » sont des « poutres en forme de fourche **Y** où l'on pendait les condamnés » et le gibet est « l'ensemble de ces fourches. » Ainsi, le narrateur sait très bien que la seconde version du pendu, une « supposition »

beaucoup plus spécifique et élaborée, correspond à ce qu'il voit vraiment. Ce changement rapide d'attention et le passage rapide du présent (« vois-je ») au conditionnel (« serait-ce ») indiquent tous les deux l'effort du narrateur de réprimer l'affreuse réalité.

(2) Réalité réprimée, l'imagination au pouvoir

La progression de la deuxième strophe à la cinquième strophe est déterminée par les efforts de l'imagination du narrateur de réprimer la réalité, ainsi que par la manière dont la réalité resurgit inévitablement de l'inconscient du narrateur.

Chaque strophe est une question menée par le conditionnel « serait-ce.» Dans la deuxième strophe, le narrateur suppose que que les sons viennent de « quelque griffon qui chante. » Où chante-t-il? La scène du spectacle est un étrange mélange de vie et de mort. D'un côté, le criquet est accroupi dans « la mousse, » une forme de vie modeste qui peut profiter de la plus infime opportunité pour survivre dans des conditions brutales, souvent une métaphore pour une vie de ténacité. Ici, la mousse pousse sur la potence, suggérant qu'elle vole son souffle à la mort. D'un autre côté, le criquet se trouve aussi sur « le lierre stérile, » dont l'absence de vie est couplée à l'image pathétique de la potence qui le piétine. L'ironie de l'expression « par pitié » renforce la brutalité de la potence. Le lierre stérile signifie ainsi le triomphe de la mort sur la vie. Ensemble, ces deux images a priori contradictoires reproduisent la dernière lutte du pendu avec la mort.

Dans la troisième strophe, le narrateur formule une nouvelle supposition quant à l'origine du son: « quelque mouche en chasse sonnant du cor. » Cette fois, l'insecte viole l'espace personnel du pendu tout en sonnant son cor « autour de ces oreilles. » La description

« ces oreilles sourdes à la fanfare des hallali » a un double-sens qui intrigue. D'un côté, si l'on coupe le vers après « ces oreilles, » « être sourd à quelque chose » est une expression signifiant être indifférent, ce qui voudrait dire que l'homme est indifférent au son du cor. Cependant, si l'on prend « ces oreilles sourdes » tout ensemble, cela signifirait que l'homme est littéralement sourd et qu'il ne peut pas entendre « la fanfare des hallali, » un son bruyant à propos duquel Messiaen explique qu'il s'agit de « la sonnerie de cor qui annonce que le cerf est aux abois » (39) L'idée que l'homme ne puisse pas entendre le son du cor crée une atmosphère de malaise, et l'absence de signe de vie dans cette strophe accentue la possibilité de sa mort.

Dans les deux strophes suivantes, les insectes deviennent de plus en plus audacieux et commencent à rentrer en contact physique avec le pendu. Est-ce un scarabée qui arrache un cheveu de son crâne chauve, ou est-ce une araignée qui tisse une fraise autour de son cou étranglé? Les interactions entre l'homme et les insectes n'en sont pas moins dérangeantes. Le vol du scarabée est qualifié comme étant « intégral »; arracher un cheveu d'un crâne chauve est évidemment impossible, mais représente aussi « la perte complète de dignité, la violation du monde d'un homme pour qui un châtiment physique n'est pas assez cruel; » (Bruhn, 194) l'idée qu'une araignée ferait une fraise pour un pendu est non seulement absurde, mais est aussi une satire audacieuse de la manière dont l'homme est mort, satire qui ne devrait pas venir d'un insecte insignifiant. Tandis que tous les signes de vie avaient disparu dans la strophe précédente, l'image de la mort devient claire dans des mots tels que « sanglant » et « étranglé. »

(3) La réalité refait surface

Sous la plume de Bertrand, l'imagination du narrateur, portée par « quelques » (mot dont l'usage implique l'incertitude, et par extension, l'imagination) insectes dont les activités sont de plus en plus intrusives, se déplace petit à petit, inévitablement, vers la mort de l'homme. Les efforts du narrateur de réprimer cette réalité sont futiles. Finalement, dans la dernière strophe, le changement d'article (de « le pendu » à « un pendu ») participe d'une dépersonnalisation qui indique la fin de la vie de l'homme, et le narrateur doit la reconnaître de manière visuelle et auditive. Ce qu'il entend est la cloche (le glas) qui sonne au loin sur les murs de la ville, et ce qu'il voit est indubitablement le cadavre d'un pendu. Clairement, la réalité l'a emporté sur l'imagination.

Comme nous l'avons analysé, le poème révèle plusieurs couches de relation entre la réalité et l'imagination: la réalité sous l'influence de l'imagination, une progression de l'imagination vers la réalité; un cycle qui commence et se termine par la réalité en passant par l'imagination. *Le Gibet* de Ravel, comme nous allons le voir, révèle lui aussi ces trois couches de façon thématique, l'ostinato de si bémol and son projet harmonique.