

Maurice Roche: Crâne, Carne

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Maurice Roche has distinguished himself from the more traditional *nouveau roman* through the role he accords to language and through the phenomenon of intertextuality in his three novels, *Compact*, *Circus*, and *Codex*. His approach to both phenomena is well illustrated by the pun "carne/crâne" to which he constantly returns in *Circus*. The *crâne*, suggesting death, and the *carne*, suggesting sexuality, may be seen as the traditional polarities of the eros/thanatos axis, and substantiate an anagrammatic reading of *Circus*' title: *cri*, or death, and *cu(1)s*, or sex. The pun, as the intersection of two or more signs, becomes for Roche the intersection of two or more sign systems: the spoken word, the written word, and the layout of the printed page. It is in his refusal to accept the linearity of a novelistic text that Roche is the most avant-garde.

The three novels of the contemporary novelist Maurice Roche—*Compact*, *Circus*, and *Codex*¹—illustrate two phenomena which typify current French writing. The first of these phenomena is the role accorded to language. It is not surprising that Philippe Sollers should now be involved in a project for translating *Finnegans Wake* into French, or that Roche himself should insert portions of the *Wake*'s first thunderclap into *Compact*. The *word* has become the hero of the contemporary novel in France, much to the detriment of traditional plot and characterization. As the study of ancient Egyptian texts shows, the magical powers and sacred character of language have been with our culture for a long time. If contemporary French writers are showing an interest in Joyce, it is because they recognize in the exiled Irishman a modern exponent of this aspect of language.

The second phenomenon, that of intertextuality, is also a familiar one. Robbe-Grillet reproduces his bicycle-riding voyeur, complete with half-spent cigarette butts, in *Projet pour une révolution à New York*. Butor points out the possibility of constructing a book

from the bits and pieces of other books. Roche recalls this in *Circus*, "l'art d'utiliser les restes" ("the art of using left-overs") and goes a step further, drawing upon his earlier study of Monteverdi in *Compact*, quoting from and alluding to both previous works in *Circus* and *Codex*. Thus, while any text of Maurice Roche may be read alone, the three novels are complementary and yield more if each is examined in the context of the others.

These two phenomena, while not the exclusive delimiters either of Roche or of the *nouveau nouveau roman*, are nonetheless useful areas upon which to focus our attention, because they converge upon a *jeu de mots* which is central to all three novels. The *jeu* involved is first found within parentheses early in *Circus* (Fig. 1); it reappears later in *Circus* (pp. 50 [Fig. 2] and 73 [Fig. 3] and in *Codex* (p. 125 [Fig. 4]). Within the parentheses are five letters: a large capital *C*, a smaller capital *E*, and small *r*, *n*, and *a* circumflex. The placement of letters is such that the reader must choose between two possible readings—*carne*, "meat" or "flesh,"² and *crâne*, "skull"—neither of which can ever be definitively chosen in preference to the other. From this point onward in *Circus* each allusion to things sexual, *carne*, will necessarily evoke death, the *crâne* (and vice versa, naturally). It is a cliché, of course, that eroticism and death have much in common. In the past, this has been graphically illustrated by the smiling martyrs of the illustrated *Golden Legend*, to which Robbe-Grillet alludes in *Projet pour une révolution à New York*, and by the occasionally un-subtle serenity of Saint Sebastian adorning the walls of our churches and museums.

Roche departs somewhat from these more familiar approaches in that he chooses the *word* as the vehicle, both verbal and ideogrammatic, for the ambiguous relationship between death and sex. Roche's pun is both verbal—a transposition of letters and sounds—and visual—words will be used to create the image of a skull throughout *Circus* and *Codex*, a dozen or so times in all. The choice of a small capital *E* is seen to be a play between two forms of expression, verbal and visual. The *E*, like the *C*, the *r/â* and the *n*, establishes an axis in the skull, causing us to turn the book 90° and to read the *E* as a lower jaw. The propriety of this reading is substantiated by a passage of *Compact* in which Roche mentions

Entre le pouce et l'index ce qui se passe aussi entre dans la tête. Sur toute la circonvolution pariétale ascendante en arrière de la scissure de rolando se trouve le centre de la sensibilité tactile; cette zone est probablement en rapport avec la sensibilité à la douleur. Examiner le moule externe | un esquipot pourri de dons de cauchemars valant son pesant d'histoire | : effet de masque bouffon, rieur, toutes dents dehors.

— Grossièrement fait ? De cinq lettres $\left(\begin{matrix} C^r \\ \text{à} \\ n \\ E \end{matrix} \right)$ dont une canine, celle de



l'œil. Démontable ! En somme tâter du test faute de mordre la carne
 Incassable ! car « no \$ and doll » — Here hung those
 lips that I have kissed — Écrase : ~~mo~~ ~~u~~ ! sur bouche cousue penta-
 cle de secrets (pierre de rosette, du  métaphore à la lèvre).

Figure 1. *Circus*, page 22.

Figure 2. *Circus*, page 50.

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(*Compact*, p. 106; cf. *Codex*, pp. 13, 92, 113) (Fig. 5).³ Here again we are obliged to rotate our monogram 90° to find the skull, the emblem of the “brothers of the coast.”

The *crâne/carne* pun in particular and the eros/thanatos axis in general are supported and reinforced by a number of elements in *Compact*, *Circus*, and *Codex*. We might begin to show this by

Figure 4. *Codex*, page 125.

Moments entre parenthèses (:



Totemtanz raide

geste figé(e) dans son mouvement

:: blason de la mort *avoir trait à chef* ta gueule
propre



attempting a Ricardolian (i.e., anagrammatic) analysis of the title of *Circus*. The two-syllable title is readily broken down into *cri*, “cry,” proper to death, and *cu* (*l*), “ass,” appropriate to the other end of the axis. *Culs* and *cris* abound in *Circus*, appearing a dozen or so times in 129 pages. Three of these manifestations merit special attention. On page 64, we learn that the “seule chose crue” (“the only raw thing” or “the only thing believed”) is “la cuite” (“the cooked”). Ignoring the dipsoidal level of the pun,⁴ if that is at all possible, we are left with a tribute, albeit a left-handed one, to Claude Lévi-Strauss. Our suspicions are soon confirmed as “le cru et le cuit” (“the raw and the cooked”) becomes “le cul et le cri” (“the ass and the cry”) (p. 87).

The third and most striking manifestation is to be found at the very end of *Circus*. Re-introducing his theme by the mention of a *cul-de-bouteille|lampe*, Roche goes on to externalize the noise he hears in his head: “la rumeur (vox populi?) le bruit de fond” (p. 129).⁵ Ironically, this *bruit de fond* is also a flatulent *bruit de fondement*, or fart. This *bruit blanc* (“white noise”) becomes “le grand cluster *universel*,” “cluster” being a cluster, a reference to Custer from *Compact*, p. 37 (“God damn them! crie le général Custer, charge! with drawn sword!”), and the traditional “clystère.” In short order, it becomes “la grosse piquouse dernier cri” (“the latest word in big stickers”) and “le suppositoire anal-gésique.” Before the bomb drops, an apparent extension to universality of the earlier *bruit de fond(ement)*, we are asked a final question about the *piquouse*: “l’avoir où?” (“where to put it?”). The obvious but unwritten answer, “au cul,” is indicated by the evocative description of the needle: “dernier *cri*.” The needle is finally transformed into the hands of a clock approaching “L’HEURE H” (“H HOUR”), setting the stage for the (at least) triple entendre, “VOICI QU’ELLE TOMBE.”⁶

The *crâne* and its *cri* are related to themes other than the *cul*. Writing prescriptively of a new society, Roche suggests “D’abord, s’enfoncer bien dans le crâne (et à coups de crosse si nécessaire) qu’il ne faut pas se casser la tête” (*Circus*, p. 108).⁷ This sentence is in fact an echo of an earlier one: “N’avoir pas (de) raison de ne pas s’enfoncer *cela dans le crâne dans le délire*” (p. 4).⁸ Later, Roche depicts a “devise qui écorche: verticale plantée dans le corps du

texte,”⁹ i.e., in the body of the *tête*, the “head.” The *devise*, “TOVS:IE:VOVS:TVE,” appears next to a literally parenthetical quotation of page 165 of *Compact*. The *crâne* is replaced on this page of *Circus* by its ideogrammatic paradigm: parentheses. The parentheses may of course represent in a schematic fashion a well-rounded *cul* as well. Interestingly enough, the passage in parentheses is the companion piece of a similar passage describing a skull, on the previous page of *Compact*:

Impasse des Catacombes.

Nous sommes attablés côte à côte, notre compagne et nous, tournant le dos à l’entrée. Nous voyons dans la grande glace, au fond de la salle, le tableau que nous formons dans ce décor: la voûte en berceau assez basse; juste au-dessous, nos deux têtes, pas trop rapprochées; à droite et à gauche la pointe d’une épaule saillante légèrement. Au centre de la table une bouteille (de la bière, plaisanterie maison!) entre deux verres. Nous avons la sensation d’être le moule de quelque calligrame fantôme: notre image réduite à la dimension d’un crâne (et nous sommes dedans).¹⁰

Figure 5. *Compact*, page 106.

On sait que

« Les maux de tête sont très près du crâne. »

On lit cela — quand on veut —,

en légende (au-dessus) d’un monogramme reproduisant, couché, l’emblème bien connu des frères de la côte : les pirates de l’île

des 

, sur la grande enveloppe bistre contenant le message posthume de l’oncle voyageur.

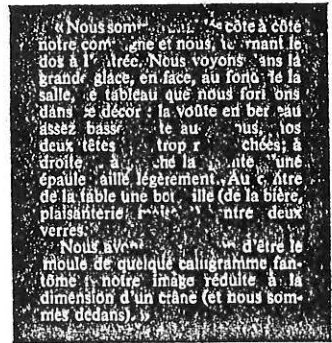
Si l’on ouvre l’enveloppe, on peut en sortir une feuille de papier format 21 × 27 (commercial).

This very text is then reprinted, white on black, next to a vertical column resembling a series of pre-columbian pictograms in *Circus* (p. 68 [Fig. 6]): portions of the text are “blacked out” in order to produce, once more, a skull. The transition from “ordinary” writing to non-verbal, purely graphic representation is completed in *Codex* as the scene is depicted visually, non-verbally and in no particular context (p. 127 [Fig. 7]).

Figure 6. *Circus*, page 68.

Anything but not everything. In rebus.

Die Linien des Lebens sind verschieden
Wie Wege sind.



DIIS MANIBVS.

Mors viae contraria, & ueloxima, quae cuncta calcat, suppeditat, rapit, consumit, dis-
foluit, mellisui duos mutuo se scribitim & ardenter amantes, hic extinctos coniungit.

Marié? Non!... mais qui fait des rêves cochons dans la case correspondante / au troisième état du cerveau, ce qui met les corps caverneux en particulier à contribution...

Enfants? A part moi, aucun. (L'autre est décédé.)

Domicile? Homme sans maison. De passage ; mais caveau en vue.

Signe particulier? Une marque sur un nez bourbon pour en avoir trop bu

Signature : *Empreintes :*

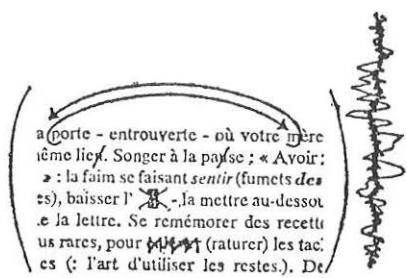
× sur le passé.



Runic characters in a vertical column appear next to the text in parentheses on page 73; a few pages later, a similar parenthetical construction is to be found with a pair of vertical electrical graphs—the caption: “Capite agere aliquid,” “to drive something into the head” (Fig. 8). A fourth parenthesis, repeating an earlier text which turns a skull into a musical instrument, is paralleled by two columns of Sanskrit musical notation. Finally, we discover a “skull-flask pour se rincer la dalle” (p. 122),¹¹ accompanied by the vertical “PRIEZ POUR NOUS” (PRAY/LAUGH FOR US”) (Fig. 9).

Figure 8. *Circus*, page 80.

à s'y méprendre toujours le même

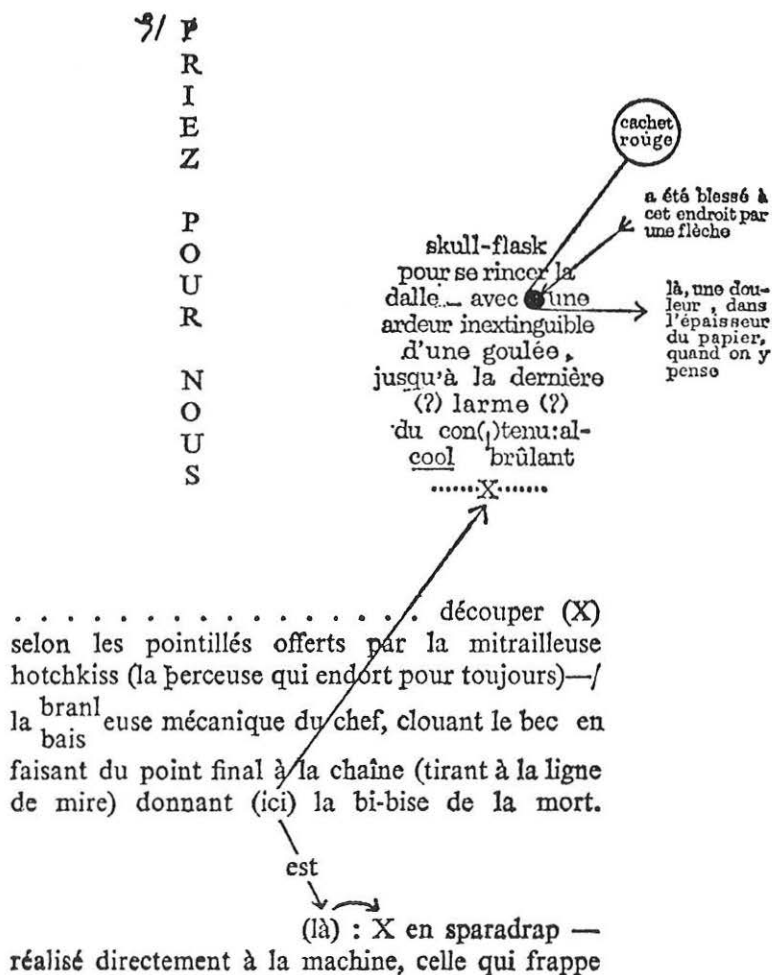


a porte - entrouverte - où votre mère
 ième lieu. Songer à la payse ; « Avoir :
 » : la faim se faisant sentir (fumets des
 es), baisser l' -Ja mettre au-dessou
 e la lettre. Se remémorer des recetti
 us rares, pour (raturer) les tac.
 es (: l'art d'utiliser les restes.). De

*s'installer à ce niveau dans
 un état premier/ sommeil } second,
 « paradoxal » } profond,
 se traduisant par
 des tracés électriques analogues
 à ceux de l'état de veille --*

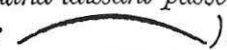

Capite agere aliquid

Figure 9. *Circus*, page 122.



There is one additional skull in *Circus* that merits a fair amount of attention (p. 123 [Fig. 10]). What is most striking is that this skull suggests death hardly at all; it bears greater resemblance to a sex manual illustrated with ideograms. This cranium is dedicated to a flagellated Sainte-Enculina.¹² “Son air pénétré” reminds us of the musical context of *Compact* and *Circus*, as well as of “pocket woman,” the inflatable sailor’s companion of *Compact*. “The pocket woman should never be boiled.” On s’en sert plusieurs fois, ensuite on la fout en l’air” (p. 59).¹³ Descending the skull’s vertical axis, we pass between a metric dactyl and a similar musical note, each within parentheses: the two eyes. Continuing on this axis of bilateral symmetry, we pass through the Cli-ilO, receiving instructions to “écarter les parenthèses de la bête.”¹⁴ Whether or not one chooses to see the symmetrical C∩ of Cli-ilO as the parentheses in question, one is in any case immediately faced with the Sainte (V)erge (“Holy Virgin”/“Holy Cock”). The paren-

Figure 10. *Circus*, page 123.

Inhibé. Stupide. En pleurs nichons dans l'être de ma-
man. Sainte-Enculina laissant passer la courbe d'une
douleur (ainsi : ) après flagellation.
— Son air pénétré quand là, là. Son air pénétré à
cette increvable à mettre en perce (qu'elle le fût, mise!)
Avec doigté en dactyle (-uu); (-rr) index sur la détente,***
la touche, titititiller Cli-ilO écarter les parenthè-
ses de la bête : Sainte Vierge (la lettre presque en-
*clavée, zigoui par la section*** guyotinée par la mor-*
deuse donnant la ques — . . . — tion en morse sur le bout de la langue

 bse

* 

** 

*** 

thesized and penetrated *V* leaves little doubt that the parentheses in *Circus* are emblematic not only of *le crâne* and *le cul*, but of the labia majora as well. This interpretation adds new significance to the vertical columns already examined, and could be anticipated and verified by a Ricardolian analysis of the title of *Circus*' earlier companion piece, *Compact*.

Needless to say, the thanatos/eros axis is less than a revolutionary novelty in Western literature. On the other hand, Roche's importance is not that he gives new life to the theme of death; his choice of themes is relatively unimportant. What is important is a novelist's absolute refusal to restrict himself to the line of type. Placing equal emphasis on what is read, what is heard, and what is seen, Roche assembles not a linear work of literature but rather a huge matrix of x dimensions. Because of the phenomenon of intertextuality, x rapidly becomes x^n , n being the number of texts resonating upon each other. Each element of the matrix is to be read in terms of semantic content and sound, but also in terms of its physical appearance on the printed page and of its spatial relationship to other elements within the matrix. His work, then, is open-ended in the extreme, to an extent paralleled perhaps only by *Finnegans Wake* and Queneau's *Cent Mille Milliards de poèmes*. Roche's current work in progress, *Cave*, promises to expand the matrix further, and its polyvalent title, together with the introduction of the theme of cave painting in *Codex*, allows us to anticipate an even stronger future commitment to visual writing on the part of the author.

1. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1966, 1972, 1974.
2. *Carne* is an Italian word, not French. Nonetheless, it clearly evokes *chair*, “flesh,” and *charogne*, “carrion.”
3. “We know that ‘Headaches are very close to the skull.’ We read that—when we want to—, on the caption (above) a monogram reproducing, on its side, the well known emblem of the brothers of the coast: the pirates of the island

of  .”

4. *Cru* refers also to vineyards and vintages; *cuite* in French slang describes someone who has had too much to drink; “prendre la cuite” is to go on a binge.
5. “the rumbling (vox populi) *the background noise.*”
6. “VOICI QU’ELLE TOMBE”: “THERE SHE FALLS.” “SHE” may be the bomb, presumably hydrogen, of H Hour, or the *hache* (“axe”), pronounced like the letter *H*. “VOICI QUELLE TOMBE”: “HERE IS QUITE A TOMB.”
7. “First, sink it into your skull (and with rifle butts, if necessary) that you mustn’t rack your brains.”
8. “(To have no reason)/(To not be right) not to sink (that into your skull) into delirium.”
9. “a motto that skins: a vertical planted in the body of the text.”
10. Impasse des Catacombes.

We are seated at the table next to each other, we and our girl friend, turning our backs to the entry. We see in the big mirror, at the end of the room, the tableau we form in this decor: the rather low barrel vault; just below, our two heads, not too close; to the right and left the tip of a shoulder projects slightly. In the center of the table a bottle (beer, a house joke) between two glasses. We have the sensation of being the mould of some phantom calligram: our image reduced to the size of a skull (and we are inside).

11. “a skull-flask to take a snort from.” *Dalle* also means “tombstone.”
12. *Enculer*: “to sodomize.”
13. “You use her several times, then you throw her away.” “La foutre en l’air” also means, literally, “to screw her in the air.”
14. “to separate the parentheses of the smug.”