A Visionary Book: Charles Nodier's *L'Histoire du Roi de Bohême et de ses sept châteaux*

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ABSTRACT: Charles Nodier's Histoire du Roi de Bohême is original in several respects: it is the first French Romantic illustrated book; it introduces into writing a completely new typographic expressivity; and it represents an aside in the *oeuvre* of an author torn between "bibliomania" and the love of fantastic tales.

The purpose of this article is to analyze the various functions of the image and the typography within *L'Histoire du Roi de de Bohême*, and to show that these visual representations of the written word, which give the effect of both spectacle and plastic utterance, mark the beginning of a quest that will find its completion many years later. It will also be seen that the author who is thus dispossessed of his control over narration is the very same who is fascinated by the "dispossession" of dreams; and that for him, a compelling necessity links this book to the oneiric inspiration peculiar to his tales.

In January of 1830, when *L'Histoire du Roi de Bohême et de ses sept châteaux* was beginning to appear in bookstores, Charles Nodier wrote: "This is a work which does not strike a responsive chord in any mind, and which is not of this era."[1] In point of fact, the book was a commercial failure, and it even bankrupted its publisher, Delangle, who fell victim to the considerable expense of its production. "To the loony bin with the King of Bohemia!" was the refrain with which, in a satire by Scipion Marin two years later, several well-known literary figures attempted to drown out the litany of Nodier's onomatopoeias and quotations assaulting their ears.[2] Champfleury, analyzing the principal illustrated books of the Romantic era — of which Nodier's was the first — confirms the book's misunderstood nature: "By its printing, by the accents of its vignettes, the *Roi de de Bohême* continues to be a most singular note in the world of the Romantic book"; but, he adds, "Nodier wished to be read.... He was mistaken."[3]

Accustomed as they were to more unified works, it was probably inevitable that the public would be put off by the narrative incoherence, visual games, and typographical disorder of this "espèce de rébus."[4] The artists who frequented the Arsenal probably did not share the public's misgivings; however, the diversity of artists' tributes to the book suggests that the author did not find evidence among them, either, of a common accord with his work. According to Balzac, "This book belongs to the school of *disenchantment*. Nodier arrives, casts a glance on our city, our laws, our sciences, and, through his spokesmen Don Pic de Fanferluchio and Brelo-

Visible Language XIX 4 (Autumn 1985), 462-483.
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que, he says to us, with a shout of laughter: 'Science? — Foolishness! What's the use of it? What is it to me?' He sends the Bourbons to die in the stable, in the form of an old aristocratic mare."[5] Of Tony Johannot's illustrations of Nodier's "poignant mockery," Balzac refers only to those in which he can point out a political intention. Delacroix's point of view is quite different: "You have given form to my dreams," he writes, "and the true effect of this will be to raise me from discouragement each time I think of your book."[6] The novelist privileged the author and his ideas; the painter — no doubt more attracted by the visual structure of the book because he had just finished illustrating Goethe's *Faust*[7] — was most interested in the immediate, and plural, reality of the book, and in the effects of its novelty on the reader.

To be sure, the *Roi de Bohême* is unusual — even within the *oeuvre* of Nodier. Its typographical *tours de force* seem totally inconsistent with the curses Nodier was at the same time heaping on the innovations of the printing industry. Did he not write in 1832 the Gutenberg's invention "accelerated civilization in order to hurtle it towards barbarism, just as opium taken in strong doses accelerates life in order to hurtle it towards death"?[8]

In the same way, it is surprising to note that this creation by the triune of author, illustrator, and typographer[9] — which made the *Roi de Bohême* a first not only in the history of French publishing, but also in the history of French literature and art — did not inspire in Nodier a desire to repeat the experiment. He had no doubt undertaken this book as an unpretentious bit of literary dabbling, a "bluette."[10] It was also no doubt very unlikely that any other publisher would have run the risks that ruined Delangle. However, these considerations did not figure in Nodier's decision to return to traditional literary forms immediately after writing *Roi de Bohême*. The effect of this experimental book was to prompt him to go back to telling stories in the old way. That the author of *Smarra* and *Trilby* could forget that the tale-teller in him had been awakened ten years earlier is evidence that the *Roi de Bohême* was certainly the direct cause of such a choice, paradoxical as that might be: "Unfortunately," he explained in December of 1829, "at first I paid no heed to the fantastic tales and fairy stories in which I now delight. I threw myself into one of those rambling plans (the *Roi de Bohême*) where mediocrity is not permitted. Now that the book is done, and what is worse, printed, I am wonderfully aware that it is as bad as it is possible to be."[11]

Of course, these contradictions are not unimportant. They show us that the *Roi de Bohême* is at the center of various undertakings that Nodier may have thought — rightly or wrongly — were no longer worthy of being backed, or that ought to be displaced to a different system.

Indeed, *displacement* is one of the principles of the work. It is remarkable, for example, that the very plurality of authors that gives it originality on the level of its conception as a *book*, reflects, on another level, one of the fundamental givens of the *text*. Nodier confirms that this was his idea — "the best, if not the only one."[12] This story, he tells us, is "a succession of reveries, *'aegri somnia,'* in the midst of which I lose myself in three personae, that is, in the three principal figures that all educated men are able to distinguish in the phenomenon of their intellect — Imagination, Memory and Judgement. In my specialty, this ill-matched trinity is composed of a bizarre and capricious fool, a pedant with a smattering of erudition and nomenclatures, and a weak and sensitive "honnête garçon," whose impressions are each modified by the other."

But Don Pic, Breloque and Théodore were not created by Nodier alone. They too find themselves in a certain way *displaced* outside of the personalities they incarnate. An entire literature animates them, permeating their names, their adventures, their fantasms, and dispersing this multiple "I" — where Imagination was already reckoning itself a zero (p. 20) — in a floating, archaic architecture of memories and quotations. The glitter displayed on the surface of the book disappears in its depths. However, the reader should not conclude from this, as does one of the book's internal critics (guided by the narrator's pen): "Well, sir, I see what this is! Yet another bad pastiche of the countless pastiches of Sterne and Rabelais!" (p. 22). These obvious borrowings, these allusions, are not a sign of weakness, but rather of a new kind of lucidity. They mean to show that, at this outermost limit of the decadence of the society in which the book was conceived, it is necessary, once and for all, to give up belief in the possibility of original thought, even the most personal thought of its author — indeed, even his own portrait. Nodier imitated Sterne early on — he begins with the little matter of a slipper[13] — but he imitated him as one who mocks antiquated civilizations, who knows that the only thing left to distract his gloominess is to "make puppets dance."[14] "When an order of things dies, there is always some ingenious demon present, smiling all the while, to watch the death-throes and give it the coup de grâce with his jester's scepter."[15] Such is the author of *Tristram Shandy*, "one of those graceful moralists who cheers with a grave smile the agony of moribund peoples, and who scatters rose-petals on their shroud."[16] To imitate Sterne means to borrow not themes or words from him — for these are never more than subordinate indices — but to borrow the *dynamic* which supports them, and to exploit this dynamic to a point that justifies a derision even greater than Sterne's. This entails, for example, breaking into the flow of the stories at the very moment of their beginning or, what amounts to the same thing, *reclosing this beginning on itself*, like a useless treasure, like the beautiful

title of a fable that will never be told, — like this "story of the king of Bohemia and his seven castles," which disappeared a first time with Trimm's memory, and which Nodier will not recount any further but will, in homage, have his book engraved with two frontispieces of choice typography instead of one, and upon which he will bestow one of those journalistic condemnations that stigmatizes the completed work, even when that work does not exist.

For it is here that the only possible originality arises: in appearance; in form. "In everything, from now on, nothing will ever be able to be novel except in its form," Nodier will say in the Introduction to his *Notions élémentaires de linguistique*,[17] adding that this form must be simple and manifest: "Of all possible forms, in a civilization breaking down, the simplest is necessarily the most novel."

We lack the documentation to prove that Tony Johannot's vignettes — themselves "novel" for the conception of illustration that they inaugurated in France, and "simple" because the wood-engraving technique used to reproduce them is the most traditional of book-producing techniques,[18] — were solicited by Nodier to bring to his text an originality that thought, in his opinion, was no longer capable of proposing. Yet it seems to me that the *Notions élémentaires* allows us to draw out some arguments that confirm this hypothesis. In this text, Nodier examines the origins, first of the spoken word, then of writing. According to him, painting is the intermediary that leads from one to the other. The poetic spoken word of primitive peoples (whose language, unsophisticated by nature, led them almost immediately to invent metaphor, which alone allowed them to express themselves with precision) was naturally to be followed, he explains — when the number of people and the distances that separated them made manifest the insufficiencies of oral transmission — "by a mode of communication that was comprehensible to the eyes, and painting provided it."[19] We know that Nodier imagined no other origin for languages than an imitative one. It is much the same, according to him, for painting: "As the figurative possibilities of language lent themselves admirably to varying the accepted meanings of the spoken word, no one sought any other technique — namely, painting — for varying the accepted meanings of the written word. Man's most abstract perceptions were reclothed in intelligible images, allegory was invented . . . ; from which results the antique use of the emblem, the metaphor of painting. From that time on, as in the time of Horace, painting and poetry were the same."[20]

In this perspective, the image is defined as *the visual equivalent of the spoken word*. Sterne, too, had anticipated this, but in a purely abstract way. In *Tristram Shandy*, a page printed in black faces one announcing the death of "poor Yorick" (Book I, Chapter XII); another page, of marbled

paper, must be interpreted as the "marbled emblem" of the work (Book III, Chapter XXXVI); while elsewhere wandering curved lines represent imaginery itineraries (Book VI, Chapter XL). Tony Johannot's images have a more complex function. This is no doubt because they are figurative, and because, for this reason, they suggest motifs, a graphic style, that superimposes itself upon the text; but above all it is because insertion of Johannot's images into the very heart of the text, by thus confirming its discontinuities in a spectacular manner, also *displaces its reading*, disturbs it, and rewews it by means of parallel commentaries.

In this respect, nothing is more significant than the series of vignettes that gives rhythm to the *Histoire du chien de Brisquet*. At first glance, we find before us an exemplary case of *illustration*, quite as exemplary as — according to Breloque, in any case — this little tale claims to be. Indeed, it is a matter of beautiful images that support and articulate the text with a scrupulous appositeness. In the first place, they are situated at critical moments in the narration: the presentation of the hero (a portrait of the dog, la Bichonne [p. 364]); then, portraits of the other principals in the drama (a family scene in a rustic cottage showing parents, children, and dog, in which it is clear that the father is advising the mother to forbid the children to go out, while the children are begging to be allowed to do so [365]); a dramatic scene (the father strikes down the wolf with an axe-blow, his children are cowering against him and the dead dog is lying on the ground [Figure 1]); the epilogue (the dog's tomb [p. 370]). Besides this quality of narrative punctuation, these vignettes also possess a realism — most useful, as we all know, to the comprehension of a story — which, in the second vignette, comes quite close to folkloric minutiae in its excess of authentic detail. We will see this passion for detail again later on with Tony Johannot's illustrations of Breloque's claim that his tale would be sufficient to permit recognition in real life of the house and characters he is describing; Tony Johannot will illustrate these claims with a hut whose thatched roof, exposed beams and casement windows ought to fulfill the avidity for "real" information of the most interested reader of such tales, so precise are the details in the drawings (p. 375).

But the reader of the *Roi de Bohême* remains ill at ease. This perfect illustration, of an admirable docility, introduces into the text an excess which contradicts the style of the text and holds it up to ridicule. Conversely, the simplicity of the narration renders derisory and suspect the details of the image that would have seemed quite amusing considered apart from the narration — *Whom to believe?* The popular success of the *Chien de Brisquet* seems to favor Breloque's point of view.[21] But Johannot's images make us understand that such was not, in truth, Nodier's own opinion, and that for him, this story is the same as another later anthology-piece,[22] the

Amours de Gervais et d'Eulalie (a tale illustrated with the same parodic fidelity, although in a different style: this time the subtle contrast of tones, the intense effect of a beautiful black underlines a "romantic" intention [pp. 56, 138]). In these two stories text and image ought to be *read* as one. By itself, the text does not provide the criteria that allow one to appreciate it: these are revealed in its illustrations. Although one might have expected of these illustrations an authentication of the discourse — as they pretend to provide — instead, they demystify its principles and by their proximity give rise to an irony that attacks both when discourse and illustration are paired, but that spares them when each is considered individually.

Thus we see where Nodier's equating of the visual and the word leads: to the provoking of *creative associations*. The image, in essence similar to discourse because it is a "written thought," must work in conjunction with discourse in the metaphorical mode, a process of composition common to both of them, and which constitutes for both a source of innovation. Thus an entire play of diverse complementarities turns the *Roi de Bohême* into a

Figure 1. Charles Nodier, *Histoire du Roi de Bohême et de ses sept châteaux* (Paris: Editions PLASMA, 1979), p. 369.

Mais qui diable pourra me dire ce que c'est qu'un cheval pâle?

Figure 2. *Histoire du Roi de Bohême,* p. 288.

symphonic madness in two registers, each of which brings out the aberrations of the other, underlining them or contradicting them. "Who the devil can tell me what a pale horse is?" asks Nodier. — Never mind, here it is, and it is indeed exceedingly "pale" because the vignette shows it capering about in a skeletal state, guided by a cavalier in a similarly ascetic guise (Figure 2). Further on, the name Venice so inspires the illustrator's zeal that it also overtakes the writer, who finds himself describing, instead of the city itself, the engraving of Venice before him (p. 44). And when the writer evokes Byron and Delacroix in connection with Venice, Johannot enthusiastically interrupts him to pay homage to them with a medallion uniting Byron's and Delacroix's two profiles (*ibid*). Or again, if it is a question of showing the reader a document, even one that the writer dreamed of, he yields the initiative to the painter, the only one who is capable of reproducing the hieroglyphs of the death certificate that the mummy of *Alma Popocamba* preserved in its entails (p. 288). In the same way, the writer leaves to the illustrator the task of completing the chapter in which he has just awakened — the writer being at that moment in a distracted state of mind most inauspicious for writing, as will be demonstrated two pages later (Figure 3). However, it also happens that the author will nullify with a single sentence the superb stage-setting invented by the illustrator to serve his imagination. Thus, hardly have we had a chance to appreciate another illustration, the impressive spectacle of a barbaric-looking charac-

Figure 3. *Histoire du Roi de Bohême,* p. 288.

ter and an open-mouthed crocodile meeting along a river, before Nodier quickly adds: "I cried out, but everything had disappeared" (p. 117).

For it is clear that, in this venture, each follows his own preferences and tastes without always heeding those of the other. Théodore's imaginary conveyance isn't a sleigh, is it? — but be that as it may, here is an illustration of one, and quite a nice one at that (p. 6). Looking at the illustrations, might not a scholar mistakenly think that Noah's dove was a seagull? Nevertheless, a fine pretext for a fantastic nocturnal vision (p. 149). The lists of names of flies and butterflies are the ravings of an entomologist-turned-storyteller. Harlequins, fools, playing-card jacks, puppeteers —not to mention that remarkable illustration (albeit unnecessary for the plot) of the Dome of Milan (p. 207) — all of these are the ravings of the illustrator.

But the advantage of this procedure is that it permits author and illustrator alike to enrich the text by adding to it elements exterior to the fiction, determined entirely by the capabilities of their arts, and to make each element in its turn take part in this incongruous dialogue. For his part, Johannot tends to slide from the imaginary towards the real, and to substitute portraits of his friends for the faces called for by the narration. Delangle lends his features to Popocambou-the-Hairy in the vignette on the title-page. Nodier and Jules Janin appear in the salons of the marchioness of Chiappapomposa (pp. 302, 311). The magician who identifies Popocambou's jaw seems to have been the illustrator's father; and, according to S.

amis de ma jeunesse. A vingt-cinq ans, je n'avois jamais recherché d'autre conversation que la sienne, et quelle conversation!

L'homme le plus long, le plus mince, le plus étroit, le plus géométriquement abstrait dans toutes ses dimensions—le plus frotté de grec, de latin, d'étymologies, d'onomatopées—de thèses, de diathèses, d'hypothèses, de métathèses—de tropes, de syncopes et d'apocopes—la tête qui contient le plus de mots contre une idée, de sophismes contre un raisonnement, de paradoxes contre une opinion — de noms, de prénoms, de surnoms — de titres oubliés et de dates inutiles — de niaiseries biologiques, de balivernes bibliologiques, de billevesées philologiques — la table vivante des matières du *Mithridate* d'Adelung et de l'*Onomasticon* de Saxius!...

Le second, créature bizarre et capricieuse —

Jeune, the illustrations, considered as an ensemble, constitute a veritable "family portrait" (p. 276).[23] Disorder? Insolence? Such is the essential law of the game that underlies the *Roi de Bohême*: to disturb norms, to upset categories. This is the price of creativity. Split into three persons by his own creation, the author retrieves his physical identity thanks to the image, but this identity is displaced within the interior of a lie. Between the real and the fictional, there is an intense, nurturing cohesion, a fraternal complicity: however, only the image has the power to show this. Though it may be nothing more than ink and paper, it possesses the absolute gift of *presence*: truth recognizes itself in the image, even as mirages endure. The porous narration of the *Roi de Bohême*, while welcoming its spectacular ambiguities, concretizes its own liberty within it.

For his own part, the writer prolongs the visual game with typography. Revealing itself as the much desired innovative "novelty of form," illustration reintroduced a certain state of innocence into the domain of printing, and raised the possibility of using printing in a creative way. "The first written book was itself nothing more than a pastiche of tradition, a plagiarism of the spoken word" (p. 26): *seeing* will replace *writing*, which will have been worn down by this tradition that has never been self-renewing. "Alas! my dear Victor, I have neither your golden pen nor your thousand-colored inks; my dear Tony, I do not have that palette even richer than the rainbow in which you dip your brushes" (pp. 13-14); but it still remains to try to *paint his thought with letters*, to lead a technique of banal perfection astray by making it *change writing* instead of merely serving to reproduce useless and chatty discourse. The journalistic "Transcription" that flays the *Roi de Bohême* is completely apropos when it vilifies its pages, "black with printer's ink to civilization's shame" (p. 78). The printing in question is in no way trying to be "civilized": it has taken the image as its guide, and seeks in its paradoxes to restore to written expression the poetry that was part of early cultures.

Writing will thus be new through its form — that is, through its typography. The chapter entitled "Protestation" affirms this, and the layout of its first paragraph in the form of stair-steps proves it, commenting on its own lines which are subject to "rules of layout so bizarre, or, better said, so madly irregular," like the large capitals in shadow type ("en caractère éclairé") — a creation of the advertising of the era — which give to the adjective NOUVEAU the amplitude of a poster headline (p. 41). But these lettrist exercises form the subject, on Nodier's part, of an ambiguous conviction. It is certainly not by chance that the portrait of Don Pic is its first support. Here and there near the vignette that shows the character's

Figure 4. *Histoire du Roi de Bohême*, p. 12.

Et s'il me plaît de m'ennuyer ce soir, pensai-je en traversant le carré, n'est-ce pas jour de Bouffes et séance à l'Athénée? D'ailleurs, repris-je en

descendant

les

sept

rampes

de

l'escalier.

— D'ailleurs, la semelle de Popocambou n'étoit pas de liége. Elle étoit de cabron.

Que dit monsieur? demanda le portier en ouvrant son vasistas, ou **was ist das** de verre obscurci par la fumée, et en y passant sa tête grotesque illuminée de rubis d'octobre.

— Je dis qu'elle étoit de cabron.

ungainly and pedantic silhouette, two formalisms oppose each other: the one, Don Pic's, a formalism of words, of their etymological and vocal mimetism, of their rhetorical *figurability*; and another formalism that permits the fragmenting of words in an optical fashion, according to the material laws of framing [*parangonnage*] — that is to say, with a total disregard for their pronunciation, their meaning and their history (Figure 4). Nodier holds the first up to derision, the way we speak ironically about a passion that has been enslaving us for a long time, but it is not certain that he wishes to risk himself completely in the second. An earlier episode in the book reproduces the same dilemma in a more explicit fashion. What, he asks, is the correct etymology for "pantoufle" ("slipper")? Exasperated by his own hypotheses, by the Syriac, Italian, and Greek in which he seeks the origin of the term, the narrator suddenly decides to leave his apartment in order to "escape the demon who is nailing him to his absurd etymology" (p. 106). His hasty exit will be in order to take, on the other page, a stairway of seven steps formed by the words that designate them, and under which appears, at the bottom of the page, framed in a droll vignette, the face of the building's porter, who is apparently emerging from his dwelling at the moment the tenant reaches the landing. Are we abandoning the old passion in favor of a new one? Abandoning the taste for semantic origins in favor of graphic plasticity? Not at all: for the porter's "vasistas" itself provokes the narrator's etymological commentary in German (transcribed in gothic letters, it is true, and also revolving around a play on words): *was ist das* (Figure 5).

Nodier's expressive typography obeys two principles: those of *motivation* and *debris*. We recognize in the first the basis of the writer's theories concerning language and painting. This is also what grounds his conception of writing. Being "hieroglyphic," writing first appeared as an abstraction of painted expression. "In the sense that it was *real*, that is, that it expressed things themselves, independent of the various appellations that each of them had received from men, . . . it was thus able to be universally intelligible to whoever possessed the key to its emblems."[24] If only the laziness of an overly-advanced civilization had not deformed the system at the very moment of its creation, the alphabet ought to be writing's perfected formula, but identically conceived: "The rational sign that designates itself is what best awakens the idea of sound through a visual analogy, and which one might call its *rebus* and its hieroglyph."[25] The ideal alphabet, which Nodier calls a "grammataire" would be a "purely real" conventional language, "restrained but sufficient; material, if one may put it that way, and nonintellectual, but one that would effortlessly include in its

Figure 5. *Histoire du Roi de Bohême*, p. 107.

narrow sphere all of the physical dealings of man with man; . . . a cosmopolitan language that would require barely a few days' study by civilized peoples, and that would open to all travelers the route to all countries."[26]

These hypotheses traverse and explain Nodier's games with letters in the *Histoire du Roi de Bohême*. The episode of the hieroglyphic document discovered in the mummy's body manifests this privileged ambivalence of the figure which, besides possessing the power to render fiction real, is also the holder of the initial secrets of writing. However, it also proves that this written representation will remain an image — which it actually is in the book (see Figure 3) — for all those (and they are the most numerous) who have not been initiated into the deciphering of its emblems (pp. 288-289). The letter has at its disposal the same iconic virtues, but in order to exploit them, it must reanimate in itself a certain emblematic quality. The "grammato-maniacal" folly (if I may be allowed to use that expression) of the "great logarithmer" Abopacataxo, who breaks down and analyzes the most infinitesimal material elements of Breloque's thesis (disregarding, for all that, "the commas, the periods, the minus signs, the spaces," etc. [p. 176]) all the while neglecting the text, is just as derisory as the formal erudition of Don Pic: the monumental, gesticulating vignette that Johannot devotes to him bears this out (p. 173). To be sure, the magic of a sorcerer's scribbles lies above all in its graphism. However, as Nodier will demonstrate a bit later in another tale (*L'Amour et le Grimoire*, 1832), this magic is useless — not so much because it could upset the healthy equilibrium of life as because it conceals the way to its real, but more modest, mysteries. The visual use of the letter implies that in virtue of its own peculiar capabilities (which are in effect different from those of words), it delivers an immediately accessible meaning. It does so in two different ways: with combinations of phonetically imitative syllables as in onomatopoeia, or by participating in a structure that is itself sufficiently hieroglyphic to be able to signify.

Onomatopoeia, of course, is in very special favor with the writer, and the marvelous chapter *Invention* is a truly felicitous piece of sonorous poetry, as audacious as it is ephemeral; conducted to the rhythm of a postchaise, it comes to take the place of the two tales that were denigrated — one by Breloque, the other by the Johannot's parodic illustrations — and it clearly indicates, at the end of the book, that such is the path down which Nodier was then dreaming of steering writing (pp. 377-378).

But if he hesitates to follow all the way to the end the adventures of a letter abandoned to the abstract hazard of page layout, the writer is on the other hand too frequent a visitor to the print-shop[27], too initiated into the manipulation of type and forms (in which a historical memory put on alert by the new possibilities of publicity invests itself during his era) not to be

attentive, with equal perspicacity, to the visual mimetism inherent in typography, and not to explore its registers in a rather innovative manner.[28]

This typographical mimetism, as is shown by the page where it coexists with a vignette, can naturally take the form of an illustration: here it will illustrate Pulchinello's "parallelogrammatic theater box," which inscribes itself around the rectangle delimiting the space (p. 216). But it is evident, too, that the function of mimetism is to supplant the illustration. Oversized Italian-style capitals printed in bold-face are reproduced in the most novel style and in a manner as paradoxically truthful as a fictional image, since we are told that the inscription, OCTROI D'URANUS (URANUS' TOLL), that the narrator claims to have seen during one of his oneiric voyages (p. 7), was written "in letters of a form and color unknown on earth." "QUELLE PITIE." — this also in capitals, but in the same font (*didot*) as the text — translates "into the vernacular," Breloque's expressive gesture signifying that he is dying of boredom (p. 358).

However, this last example remains rather surprising, because Breloque's extravagant attitude should have called for a vignette as well. Is this absence meant to signify a whim on the part of the illustrator? To make us understand that the overly-precise description is self-sufficient to the point of excess? I prefer to think that the absence serves to accentuate Nodier's intuition concerning the various functions of graphic expressivity; this intuition, grounded in a comparative reflection of word and image, led him in this case to knowingly choose to privilege only the typographical form. The image suggests — or creates — objects and people. Through typography, an *enunciation* concretizes itself. This enunciation can transpose the gift of objectivity it derives from its iconic function into what is the most characteristic of discourse, and create, using only the play of its artifice, a *speaking individual*. The chapter entitled *Distraction*, printed upside down in relation to its title because the not-yet-awake narrator has no sense of orientation, is a picturesque example of this capability. (p. 297). *Conversation* offers a more subtle example: its five pages organized like any play script — speakers' names in gothic type, stage directions indicated below in smaller-sized roman type than the lines of dialogue — contains a series of mottos (which are the theme of the dialogue), transcribed in tiny capitals to indicate that they are quotations. But are they spoken? Or are they inscribed? Breloque's own motto, which ends the chapter rather like a concluding illustration, is more remarkable still. Indeed, it is reproduced in "ultra-capital letters" and set on three lines, each one more monumental than the last: WHAT - IS - THAT - TO ME? — an expression that, as we have seen, was to fascinate Balzac (Figure 6). It is not immaterial that, in this case as in the one mentioned above, the typographical manifesto was preferred by the author over an illustration that, here as well, would have

been perfectly justified. (Breloque has, as a matter of fact, just described in great detail the emblematic portrait that hangs above this motto.) But one necessarily excludes the other. An image gives life to that which discourse could only allusively evoke, but images do not possess the power of speech. Here, the word is the most important, and Nodier knows that he has at his disposal specific and perfectly adequate means of *showing* this.

Thus, the image is the doman of medallions, emblems, and blazons, and typography is the domain of mottos. The image awakens the "luminous secret" of the icons on the surfaces of the book;[29] typography breaks discourse into fragments of truth which are also capable of translating, beneath their expression, the *very voice*, real or fictitious, that articulated them. Only the alphabetical word has this power, for it is at the same time a bearer of meaning and, in its disparate elements, of abstract power — that is, it is capable of transmitting every intentional color, even the most unconscious, linked to a particular individual's taking charge of it.

That is why Nodier tends to slide so spontaneously from the typographical motivation toward *debris*. The pure letter, not having been invented by man according to the "natural" rules of mimology, could be nothing more than decorative. The word in isolation, on the other hand, escaping from

Figure 6. *Histoire du Roi de Bohême*, p. 84.

QU'EST-CE QUE

CELA

ME FAIT?

———

conventions both of syntax and of controlled thought, gives access to a sort of *naive fullness* of meaning. Writing, and especially typography, makes the word an assertive unity completely apart, supported by something other than the spoken word, a support richer and more ambiguous because it is of a spatial nature and not simply determined by temporal continuity.

This seems to me to be the lesson of the chapter *Exhibition,* wherein that unhappy manuscript — that was supposedly reduced by fire to "twenty-two little fragments burnt around the edges ... between which there exists no ... feeble point of moral contact, no slight philosophical analogy, no vague possibility of oratorical association or of grammatical relationship" (p. 93) — will take on, through the fate that supposedly guides the hand of the writer-typographer as he distributes the words on a page, *the authority of an objective message* (Figure 7). These "debris of written thought" become its spectacle. Must we believe, as certain of his commentators claim,[30] that these debris reveal unconscious mechanisms, requiring this page to be read in a linear and descending fashion — above, the super ego ("science," "philosophy"), and below, that libidinal "slipper" that might reveal hidden obsessions? To adopt this reading is to forget that spatial relations are completely different from those that govern a line of reasoning. As Johannot presents it, a figure in the heraldic decoration [*escarboucle*] bordering the page, that slipper becomes the carbuncle [*escarboucle*], a secret key, but also the radiant emblem of fairy tales, which can be seen equally as a base or as a summit.[31] In fact, I believe that the purpose of this page layout is more to underline the derisory equivalences established in the progression of terms leading up to "pantoufle." The equivalent of figures, or forms, is indeed the principle that structures every *tableau.*[32] The elaboration of their meaning is to be found outside of them; they rest in the interpretations evoked in the spectator by the association that he makes between these distinct elements thus placed in a *situation of identity*. Here, all that is circulating from one word to the other, with the exception of the last one, are differences obtained through synonymy, paranomasia, or metonymy — that is to say, through rhetorical strategies that are all, at different levels, concerned with *proximity* and thus imply a partial similarity of one to the other. The autonomy that these differences support leads only to a tautology: if "science" *is* "mystification," and the "coquecigrue" *is* "slipper," *therefore* "science" itself *is* "slipper." The stage setting is rather ironic — because this page wishes to be taken equally as farcical and innovative — but it is in no way constructed according to the model of either discourse or diagram. Like the onomatopoetic *Invention* which closes the text, and in the same spirit of parody, Nodier here proposes a *creation,* a creation that is just as original for him because it also rests on a manipulation of *forms,* and not on *ideas.*

Figure 7. *Histoire du Roi de Bohême*, p. 95.

We must still consider why, having thus discovered such new principles of expression, Nodier was later to renounce them, and with so few regrets. I see two reasons for this. The first is that illustration and typographical play are too complementary in the *Histoire du Roi de Bohême*, so much so that the author was thereafter unable to envisage exploiting them separately to the same advantage. These procedures had been evoked jointly, like two techniques that permit the writer visibly to fragment writing, and to carry on Sterne's work by making the effects more explicit and more spectacular. The experiment had a theoretical origin — to be sure, never very clearly formulated — which, beneath its apparent disorder, supported the adventure of the experiment.

On the other hand, as we have seen, Nodier is not dreaming of lettrism or concrete poetry, but rather of literary creation: the difference is important. It means that novelty of forms is only justified in his eyes by the ideas that it brings to light. This is the second reason that must have made him indifferent to his technical discoveries: for him, their value did not derive from their innovative character, but from the *subjective intimacy* that expressed itself through this novelty of forms. By displacing on the surface of the book this fragmentation that was first sought after by way of provocation, by way of a challenge issued both against a past that had become useless

and against a chattering modernity, image and typography had served to confirm the effectiveness of procedures that were not exclusive to them, but that allowed for the renewal, not only of the form of a text, but also of its thought and even of its very author. The autonomy of fragments thus set apart or imposed upon the continuity of discourse offered access to equivalents and substitutions of meaning that traditional literature was not able to authorize. The combination of these fragments, produced so naturally in the reading of the *Roi de Bohême* in spite of their heterogeneity, made credible the possibility of a true syntax worked out in discontinuity, whose unity is the doing of the reader, and not of the narrator.

In truth, the *Roi de Bohême* represents the decisive manifestation of a step that *Smarra* already allowed us to anticipate, but this time it is more personal — decisive because here it takes on an experimental form which makes it escape from its author.[33] Is this manifestation precisely that of the dream? The *Roi de Bohême* tells us that it is, more essentially, that of *seeing*, of vision considered as a mysterious but absolute mode of thought.

For vision plays a fundamental role in the *Roi de Bohême*; it does more than simply determine its forms. The story of Gervais and Eulalie rests entirely upon the notion of vision. Gervais kills himself for having divined what "dangerous fascination ... passions exercise through the glance" (p. 134), and for having understood that his beloved, from the moment she regained her sight, became accessible to others more adept at seducing her, "to those who have their spirit and their soul in their eyes, to those who speak by means of glances, and who cause women to dream with one of those darts that shoot forth from their eyes" (pp. 183-184). But it is not simply this psychic fatality of the glance that is emphasized by the story. Through the new reading materials now available to Eulalie, Gervais also comes to understand that the pleasure they had shared in discovering texts by skimming them with their fingers is nothing compared to the pleasure provided by the visual approach. The sensations of the reading glance are "much more intense, much more rapid than those of the sense of touch" (p. 190); they give to the imagination and to the feelings a richness and a mobility that are otherwise inconceivable. "What a vast region of magnificent thoughts and touching meditations is open to that favored being who has received from heaven the organs to read, and the intelligence to understand!" (p. 191). The eyes awaken the spirit: the young blind man remembers having had the experience as a child (p. 186); Eulalie's words confirm it to him, "bewitching [his ear] with the impressions that she gather[s] in at the sight of all of the marvelous painted pictures that sight reveals to thought" (p. 189). And Don Pic, devoting one of his essays to color (an essay itself laid out on the page in the form of a *tableau* [p. 147]), does not hesitate to go still further, asserting that "plastic ideas" are the basis of all

of man's spirituality. It is on these plastic ideas that "have been molded all typical forms of thought, in its indefatigable and persistent creativity" (p. 148).

Such is clearly the revelation we owe to our dreams. They only serve to amplify monstrously, to the point of rendering it hallucinatory, this visual thought of which our consciousness is unaware, but which is nonetheless essential to it. That is why Nodier was able to define *Smarra* as both imitation — since no original writing is henceforth possible, according to him — and as an original work. He said: "My work on *Smarra* is . . . nothing but a verbal exercise, the work of an industrious schoolboy."[34] But he had borrowed the elements and structures of this visual and oneiric thought, too rarely recognized by the poets as their true source of inspiration, from the authors of antiquity; he was the first to have wanted this visual and oneiric thought to be read *for its own sake*. It was surely not by chance that he again took up this project, with *La Fée aux miettes*, immediately after the *Roi de Bohême*.[35] This book of images and fragments represents a comedic homage — but "sleep is comical" (p. 261) — to the "irrational soul that wakes in us when we sleep" (p. 260).

"Dreams are the parody of life" (p. 260): this explains why Nodier placed the *Histoire du Roi de Bohême* under the sign of parody. But the formal diversity of the work and its narrative casualness are also the sign of a more serious and troubling sensitivity to the consequences of this "bizarre play of the dazzling prism of dreams" (p. 261) on the personality of the dreamer. The coach of the imagination, the "pretty carriage, the one that brought us back from Timbuctoo and that will perhaps one day take us to Bohemia" (p. 342), is also a "nautical conveyance" (p. 344) — a *bateau ivre* — or "the spiraling fall of a winged linden seed" (p. 345). But does the carriage offer us a voyage, or a series of metamorphoses? *Who* is thus pulled into these unstable mirages? And also, *who* is the author of this book in which we see the mirages escaping from our grasp? By making a spectacle of writing in the name of visual thought, Nodier displaces the literature of the authoritarian world of discourse toward that of reading and of its willful mishearings — not only because he senses that certain of his readers will "begin the book at the end" (p. 109), but because the very condition of the dream is that it belongs to no one, and delivers the individual from all subjugation, even that of his own consciousness. It is the same for the book that claims to show this. We can say of the book what Nodier says about Pulchinello: "What does it matter whose hand makes him dance, and in whose mouth is placed the sharp and strident *articulations* that will give him voice" (p. 208). What does it matter whether the *Roi de Bohême* has one or several authors, and whether each of them has many faces. The truth of a text, if it is a dream — that is, if it is a visible language rather than a spoken

language — belongs to each person who follows its pathways. Beneath its fantasies, even the most superficial of them, the *Histoire du Roi de Bohême et de ses sept châteaux* reveals a conception of the book already that of Mallarmé, that of the "book taken from here and there, guessed at like an enigma, whose aspect changes — a book that is almost remade in one's [the reader's] own image": a conception of writing without a master, of the book without an *author.*

Translated by Janet Solberg

1. Letter of January 12, 1830, *Correspondance inédite de Ch. Nodier* published by A. Estignard, Moniteur Universel, 1876, p. 228.

2. J. Larat, *La Tradition et l'exotisme dans l'oeuvre de Ch. Nodier* (Paris, E. Champion, 1923), pp. 422-423.

3. Champfleury, *Les vignettes romantiques* (Paris, E. Dentu, 1883), pp. 305-306.

4. In Champfleury's words, *ibid.*, p. 8.

5. Article of January 9, 1831 in *Le Voleur*, reprinted by J. Richer, "Autour de l'*Histoire du Roi de Bohême,* Charles Nodier 'dériseur sensé,'" *Archives des Lettres Modernes* (Paris, 1962), 2, no. 42, pp. 22-23.

6. Quoted by S. Jeune, "Plus jeune qu'à sa naissance, le *Roi de Bohême* a cent cinquante ans," *Revue Française d'Histoire du livre* (Paris, 1980), no. 28, p. 499, n. 1.

7. E. Delacroix, le *Faust de Goethe,* 18 lithographs published by Motte in 1828.

8. "De la perfectibilité de l'homme, et de l'influence de l'imprimerie sur la civilisation," Ch. Nodier *Oeuvres complètes,* Renduel, 1832, Vol: V, p. 262.

9. However, the collaboration is not quite equal, since the author also participates in the typographer's work.

10 Letters of March 8, 1828 (*Correspondance, op. cit.*, p. 209) and December 19, 1829 (quoted par J. Richer, *op. cit.*, p. 8).

11. Letter of December 19, 1829, *ibid.*, p. 9.

12. *Ibid.*

13. "La plus petite des pantoufles" was written in 1805. See J. Richer, *op. cit.*, p. 29 ff.

14. "Miscellanées, variétés de philosophie, d'histoire et de littérature," *Oeuvres complètes, op. cit.*, p. 17.

15. "Du fantastique en littérature," *ibid.*, p. 86.

16. See article cited in note 14, p. 20.

17. "Notions élémentaires de linguistique, ou histoire abrégée de la parole et de l'écriture, pour servir d'introduction à l'alphabet, à la grammaire et au dictionnaire," *Oeuvres complètes*, Vol. XII, 1834, p. 3. Cf. also l'*Histoire du Roi de Bohême*, p. 361: "The subject is not new, and I wish that it were still less so."

18. Indeed, it is this technique that permits a simultaneous printing of text and image. The wood engraving process used by T. Johannot introduces, however, some completely new possibilities of expression. This process was invented by Th. Bewick at the end of the 18th century.

19. *op. cit.*, p. 87.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 88.

21. The *nouvelle* was reprinted separately, after Nodier's death, in the *Contes de la Veillée*.

22. The story also reappeared in the *Contes de la Veillée* under the title, "Les Aveugles de Chamouny."

23. S. Jeune, *"Le Roi de Bohême et ses sept châteaux:* livre-objet et livre-ferment," *Charles Nodier*, conference proceedings, (Paris: Belles-Lettres, 1981), p. 202.

24. "Notions élémentaires de linguistique...," *op. cit.*, pp. 90-91.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 140.

26. *Ibid.*, pp. 297-298.

27. See, for example, the chapter *Verification*, pp. 167-170. We also know that Nodier founded *Le Bulletin du bibliophile* in 1834.

28. Regarding this subject, see my article on "Rhétorique et typographie, la lettre et le sens," *Revue d'esthéthique*, 1979, 1-2, Paris, U.G.E., coll. 10/18, pp. 297-323.

29. Mallarmé used this expression referring to Berthe Morisot. See *Igitur, Divagations, Un coup de dés* (Paris, Poésie/Gallimard, 1976), p. 166.

30. On this subject, see S. Jeune article cited note 23.

31. We shall note, by the way, that the slipper's owner, Popocambou, has in fact illustrated his reign by having a pyramid built standing on its point. (p. 99.)

32. Regarding this problem, see my article on "La déraison graphique," *Textuel*, no. 17, Université Paris 7, 1985.

33. It is nevertheless in the guise of a translation that Nodier presents *Smarra* in 1821. He will abandon this pretense in the 2nd preface to the tale in 1832.

34. Second preface to *Smarra*, in Ch. Nodier, *Contes*, ed. by P.G. Castex (Paris, Garnier, 1961), p. 41.

35. What is more, in the *Roi de Bohême* one finds in the character of Alma Popocamba the same equivocal alternation between youth and advanced years as in Nodier's *La fée aux miettes*. (see pp. 281, 284)