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**Chris Tinker**, *Georges Brassens and Jacques Brel: Personal and Social Narratives in Post-War French Chanson*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005. vi + 179 pp. Notes, bibliography, copyright acknowledgement, and index. \$35.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-85323-768-9.

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French *chanson*, because of its intermediary position between popular and intellectual culture, is a key medium through which to view and analyse questions of French cultural history and national identity. Chris Tinker here focuses his attention on Georges Brassens and Jacques Brel, two iconic figures of traditional French *chanson*. He observes in his introduction that “little has been written in English so far on Brassens and Brel, or more generally on *la chanson française*” (p. 2), and that “much of the academic work written in French...has dealt individually with Brassens and Brel” (p. 2). It is true that there are many more books written about Brassens and Brel in French than in English, but French *academic* work on the subject, properly speaking, is itself very limited. A majority of the French authors who have written about the two singers were journalists, or, in some cases, relatives or friends of the singers. Although some of them, such as Olivier Todd and Jacques Vassal, have produced very valuable critical biographies,<sup>[1]</sup> French academic interest in the two singers has remained incidental; by contrast, publications in English in the last six years indicate that Anglophone academic interest in French *chanson* is growing,<sup>[2]</sup> with Tinker’s being the latest such study.

In this comparative study of the works of Brassens and Brel, Tinker’s intention is to go beyond biography and mere lyric-analysis by also taking into account the music, and underlining the interactions between the different narrative voices contained in the songs; in other words, his aim is to contrast what the real and/or implied authors (his terms) say to what is supposed to be understood by the implied listener. His approach is a thematic one, structured around “The Self in Solitude”, “The Self and Others” and “The Self and Society”. This allows Tinker to analyse the main themes in the works of Brassens and Brel, from the most introspective to the most socially orientated.

In “The Self in Solitude”, he examines the songs’ approach to death and religion, insisting on their deeply introspective dimension; he analyses the singers’ very individualistic attitude towards the notion of divinity, thereby relativizing the labels of “atheist” and “pessimist” usually associated with Brel and Brassens. “The Self and Others” focuses on songs about love and friendship, and offers a very interesting perspective on the singers’ conception of women; Tinker does not just discuss the important question of misogyny, he also draws parallels between the singers’ interactions with women and men and their conflicting aspirations for love and tenderness. “The Self and Society” moves on to the social background of the songs; Tinker here analyses the singers’ diverging conceptions of the bourgeoisie, as well as their reaction to celebrity, nationalism and *political* engagement. Such a structure of the study in turns permits an examination of the most significant themes, concurrently widening the scope of study from the “Self” to “Society”, and narrowing it down from universal themes, like love, death, God, to more specific ones, such as France’s political and social situation at a given time, and the attitude of artists towards the emerging star system.

Tinker’s object is twofold: while comparing Brassens and Brel’s treatment of similar themes in order to argue their significance in post-war France, he also highlights the complexity of the narrative voices in the songs, exposing the dynamic relationship which exists between what he calls the “implied listener” (p. 5) and the real and/or implied authors. This study of the tension between the “real author” and the

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“implied author” is very interesting and is particularly relevant in the cases of Brassens and Brel given that both used their songs as a device through which to express the conflictual relationship between their own ideas, the ideas that were wrongly attributed to them, and the ideas of others. Indeed, the tension that surfaces in their work can be explained by the singers’ unease with the media intrusion into their private lives that their public status attracted.

However, despite this conceptually constructive approach, I have certain misgivings. The debate between the real author and the implied author is not always taken as far as it should have been, and the analysis of interviews with the singers is sometimes insufficient. It is understandable that given the number of relevant interviews and articles available, a selection had to be made, but some of Tinker’s assertions would have benefited from the backing of quotations. In the chapter “Approaching Death” for example, Tinker agrees that when Brassens sings that he would like to be buried on the beach of Sète,<sup>[3]</sup> there is “a strong identification between the real author, Brassens, and the implied author” (p. 15). This is a sustainable view, but it would have been useful to refer to the famous 1969 interview with Brassens, Brel, and Ferré, in which Brassens told Ferré: “je te signale que je m’en fous d’être enterré sur la plage de Sète! Ça m’est complètement égal... J’ai fait ça pour m’amuser, quoi. Pour aller au bain de mer!”<sup>[4]</sup> Whether Brassens was sincere in this is open to question, but in a debate about the tension between real and implied authors, it would have been worth considering.

At the end of the same chapter, Tinker’s conclusion that in Brassens and Brel’s work, the variety of representations of death “confirms that the implied authors, if not the real authors, are permanently unstable, fluctuating between optimism and pessimism” (p. 29), could have been discussed in relation to the aesthetic argument of the recurrence of death in their songs, particularly in Brassens’ case. Brassens admitted in an interview in 1966 that “death” was not only a theme, but also an aesthetic device: “Dans ‘Les Funérailles d’antan’, par exemple, je me sers de la mort comme prétexte, elle est là comme ça, exactement comme une marguerite dans une histoire d’amour.”<sup>[5]</sup> Sara Poole’s reflections on the meaning of death in Brassens’ work might also have been referred to here, in which she has argued, echoing Pol Vandromme’s observations, that “Brassens’ interest in the trappings of death reveals itself as, essentially, an enjoyment of the ceremonial associated with funerals.”<sup>[6]</sup>

There are other such omissions, and Tinker’s often partial engagement with the relevant critical literature diminishes the impact of his argument. In addition, although references and comparisons with other singers are on many occasions very helpful (pp. 71-72, or in chapters seven and eight), there are also several digressions about Ferré which add little to the author’s argument in the present study. For example, Tinker compares Brel and Brassens’ conception of women and of friendship to that of Ferré; this is not uninteresting, but it serves no specific purpose within the broader argument of the book (pp. 68, 111).

In Tinker’s defence, it must be stressed that his study offers a very clearly organized overview of the thematic framework of Brassens and Brel’s work and his analysis raises many interesting questions. Unfortunately, however, these questions are not always fully developed. The reader sometimes feels that Tinker has been frustrated by his word limit, and that as a result, the argument is curtailed. Some terms, for example, lack a more thorough definition: his use of the word “*bonheur*” can be ambiguous; in the same way, it is not clear what Tinker means by Brel’s “romantic attitude towards love” (p. 74). One feels that an extra chapter would have been helpful to sum up, problematize and exploit the crucial issues which his thematic analysis exposes—such as the nature of happiness in the two singers’ works, or their position in the literary tradition.

For example, Tinker explains in his introduction that he has used the theme of happiness to “underpin” (p. 7) his discussion; and he refers regularly, at the conclusion of each chapter, to the ways in which the

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different themes analysed fit in with the singers' potential quest for a "social" or an "individualistic" happiness (p. 7); so, in a way, "happiness" is used as a main thread which justifies the order of the chapters. The problem, however, is that the notion of "happiness" is not problematized at all: Tinker admits that "*bonheur*" is a "vague and indefinable" concept (p. 7), which might therefore have required a more careful conceptualisation here if it is to "underpin" the study. The notion of "*bonheur*" is alluded to at the end of almost each chapter and subchapter as a transition to the next one, but even then, the relation between the theme dealt with in the chapter and the idea of "*bonheur*" is never developed and exploited in the way that the introduction suggests it will be. The reader is left to draw his or her own conclusions from the paragraphs about happiness scattered through the chapters if s/he wants to have an overview of the question. The lack of problematization of the theme "happiness" does not undermine the book as a whole, since the other themes are all fully treated and developed, individually, in each chapter, but it fails to provide a dynamic connection between the chapters: "happiness" justifies the order of the chapters, but it does not contribute to any argument.

There is arguably then a discrepancy between what Tinker promises and what he delivers. In the introduction, for example, he announces that "taken as a whole, this study of personal and social narratives will help us to account for the significance of these singer-songwriters"(p.7); however, while Tinker's book accounts for the *relevance* of the singers in the social and cultural context of the time, it does not account for their *significance*. The distinction is important as far as the expectations of the reader are concerned. Again, in the conclusion, Tinker says: "I have endeavoured to explain the significance of Brassens and Brel with reference to the social, political and cultural environment in which they lived and to which they reacted, symptomatically or oppositionally" (p. 177). Yet, while Tinker situates Brel and Brassens in the literary, musical and social context of the time by establishing the relationships between their works and those of Beckett, Gainsbourg, Ferré, Ferrat, these relations are not analysed: Tinker's book tells us where Brel and Brassens stand in relation to a social and literary context, but it does not tell us how or why their position is significant and singular.

Tinker's introduction also announces that "Part III assesses how far their songs contributed to the growing oppositional discourses of the 1960s" (p. 7); here again, the terms used are not accurate enough: the songs might *reflect* oppositional discourses, but they do not *contribute* to them. As Tinker himself remarks, both Brassens and Brel insisted on not being politicized; he points to the paradoxes in the ideas expressed by the singers in their songs. Such paradoxes do not *contribute* to any consistent discourse: instead, they give an account of the variety of oppositional discourses of the time and of the confusion that they generated.

Similarly, some aspects of the analysis which Tinker sums up in the conclusion sound more ambitious than they perhaps should. He writes, for example: "I have also compared the work of Brassens and Brel with examples from the traditional literary genres of poetry, prose and drama. Such comparisons indeed help to explain why our singer-songwriters were often canonised alongside the great figures of French literature" (p. 177). It is true that the singers' work is situated in relation to authors like Beckett and Aragon, and there are useful references to Camus, Sartre, Rabelais and Prévert for example. But Tinker does not provide any analysis of *why* the singer-songwriters "were often canonised alongside the great figures of French literature." Of course, he does not need to explain why, since it is not the purpose of his study to deal with the singers in a literary context and since Lucienne Cantaloube-Ferrieu has already dedicated a thorough study to it,[7] but the reader might feel misled about the aims and achievements of his study. Tinker adds later on: "I have also demonstrated that other aspects of representation--musical, vocal and gestural--are crucial to our understanding of songs" (p. 178). He has indeed regularly and very accurately referred to the effects created by the use of various instruments, by Brel's dramatisation of his songs and by the singers' distinctive voices; but here again, there is no in-depth analysis of the importance of music and performance to justify the use of the term "demonstrated."

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Overall, however, these criticisms should not detract from the very valuable content and purpose of Tinker's book; it offers a precise and helpful introduction to the works and personalities of two emblematic figures of the French *chanson*. Tinker has identified the themes that torture and animate the public and private characters of Brel and Brassens, thereby revealing the complex relationships between the narrative voices in the songs; and not only has he revealed these relationships, but he has also contextualized them. By pointing out similarities between Brel, Brassens and established literary figures, he has contributed to locating the singers not only in the tradition of popular music, but also in a wider cultural tradition.

In the last paragraph of the conclusion, Tinker insists that "This work, through its consideration of the various processes and practices that generate cultural meaning within songs, provides a general framework for a similar study of other figures within this and subsequent periods..." (p. 179). The advantages of the structure of Tinker's thematic analysis have already been noted, and it certainly provides "a good framework for a similar study." Studying the themes of songs from "The Self in Solitude" to "The Self in Society" is a helpful approach to songs in general and is a very effective way of raising essential questions about the position of a particular singer in a given cultural context. If the aim of this study is to provide a framework, then it is legitimate that it should raise many issues which can be left to the reader to consider. It is unfortunate, therefore, that Tinker did not develop this idea further, at the beginning of the book, as it would have given his study a different perspective and one which would have justified what otherwise appear as deficiencies. If this is to be read as a "framework for a similar study", the lack of problematization of the notion of *bonheur*, for example, could be justified as it would no longer fall within the scope of the study.

Tinker's book does raise many interesting issues about the place of the singer in political or literary discourses; it also highlights the ways in which the *chanson* genre, because it involves so many different elements, such as voice, music, words, performance, media, technology, etc., puts the singer-songwriter in an essential position in the context of cultural studies. In this particular case study of the works of Brel and Brassens, Tinker identifies crucial questions such as "How far can you trust a singer?", "How valid is their discourse?", "How far do they contribute to political and literary discourses?"; but his point—which would have benefited from being made clearer in the introduction—is not actually to answer or discuss these questions, but to invite the reader to do so.

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## NOTES

[1] Olivier Todd, *Jacques Brel: une vie* (Paris: Laffont, 1984) and Jacques Vassal, *Georges Brassens ou la chanson d'abord* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1991).

[2] See for example: Peter Hawkins, *Chanson: The French Singer-Songwriter from Aristide Bruant to the Present Day* (London and New York: Ashgate, 2000); Dimitris Papanikolaou, "Singing Poets: Popular Music and Literature in France and Greece (1945-1975)" (Ph.D. Thesis, University College London, 2002); Hugh Dauncey and Steve Cannon, *Popular Music in France from Chanson to Techno* (London and New York: Ashgate, 2003); David Looseley, *Popular Music in Contemporary France* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2003); David Looseley, ed. *Popular Music in France* [Special issue of *French Cultural Studies*, 16/2] (June 2005).

[3] Brassens, 'Supplique pour être enterré à la plage de Sète', 1966.

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[4] François-René Cristiani and Jean-Pierre Leloir, *Trois hommes dans un salon: Brel Brassens Ferré* (Paris: Fayard/Chorus, 2003) p. 35.

[5] "Brel et Brassens: Quelques vérités sur nous-mêmes et les autres" *L'Express* (03/January 9, 1966) p. 31. Extract of an interview broadcasted on Europe 1 in January 1966.

[6] Sara Poole, *Brassens: Chansons* (London: Grant & Cutler, 2000), p. 43.

[7] Lucienne Cantaloube-Ferrieu, *Chanson et Poésie des années 30 aux années 60: Trenet, Brassens, Ferré... ou les 'enfants naturels' du surréalisme* (Paris: Nizet, 1981). Cantaloube-Ferrieu's study focusing on French singer-songwriters, it does not take Brel into account.

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