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Nina Ekstein

Trinity University, nekstein@trinity.edu

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Noises play an unusually large role in Paul Scarron's *Le Roman comique* (1651, 1657): there are over three hundred explicit references in the novel to some form of noise. Although noise is not commonly assigned a significant role in prose fiction, its substantial presence suggests that it may indeed have functions in *Le Roman comique* beyond simply being a realistic or comic feature. I intend to show how noise is part of the narrative structure, and, furthermore, how it exemplifies and reinforces the tension between coherence and incoherence in the novel.

Critics in the last twenty-five years have taken a great variety of approaches to *Le Roman comique* , but the vast majority of their studies share a slight but pervasive tone which seems both apologetic and justificatory, as though the authors were trying to rehabilitate the novel. To some degree this is a common stance in interpretations of literary texts not normally included in the canon of great works.[1] Yet there is something more: Scarron's *Roman comique* is marked by a certain lack of coherence which jars the reader. There are numerous elements working to undermine its coherence; these include the mixture of tones, the lack of an ending, the presence of the Spanish stories, and the ironic, bemused voice of the narrator who toys with the status of the adventures, alternately implying that they are truth and fiction. Critics agree that *Le Roman comique* presents certain problems of composition. Henri Coulet finds that "Scarron s'est en effet montré désinvolte dans la composition de l'oeuvre;" Gustave Reynier describes it as "lâche et incohérente," and Antoine Adam posits an "absence de composition."[2] Even apologists for the work often point to the same issues by their defense of the work's coherence. These scholars employ considerable ingenuity and rhetorical skill to join the disparate parts into a whole. Maurice Lever insists that "le désordre du *Roman comique* n'est qu'apparent; il dissimule en

fait une structure d'une remarquable complexité." Jacques Truchet, Jean-Pierre Chauveau, and Henri Coulet explain away the apparent incoherence by linking it to a baroque aesthetic.[3] Many others are engaged in suggesting structures that unify the work and serve to demonstrate the novel's essential coherence. Joan DeJean argues for the structuring function of the narrator's interventions; Jean Serroy suggests a "sturcutre de chassecroisé" with characters repeatedly chasing after one another; and for Peter Conroy the novel is unified by a blending of the comic and the "précieux."[4] In short, there exists a tension between (and even within) critical readings of *Le Roman comique* as coherent and incoherent, reflecting the presence of this tension within the novel.

The link between noise and the problems of coherence is far from obvious at this point. The distance between the two objects of examination is great, but the value of that distance lies in the fact that noise provides a highly concrete, rather than speculative, illustration of the duality of coherence and incoherence within the novel. To cover that distance, we must begin with an understanding of noise.

What is noise ? It can be defined so broadly as to incorporate sounds of any kind. Most definitions, however, concentrate on loudness, disorder (confusion), the multiplicity of sounds (Furetière: "amas de plusieurs sons confus et violents qui offencent l'oreille"), and disharmony. Noise is generally considered, particularly in the domain of communication theory, to be in direct competition with language, sharing the same acoustic space, and obscuring the message carried by speech. For our purposes, noise in prose fiction will be understood to mean the description or reproduction of a loud, harsh, or confused sound or group of sounds. While the human voice can be the source of noise (such as cries), a distinction must be made between noise and language.

Le Roman comique is an extremely noisy novel; characters make noise, are interrupted by noise. Whether its source is human, animal, or mechanical, cacophony is everywhere. Noise permeates the novel, from the first paragraph ("ses chevaeux ... respirant un air marin qui les faisoit hennir," p. 532)[5] to the last ("Il [Ragotin] en enragea beaucoup et encore plus d'ouir rire toute l'assistance," p. 796). Of the forty-three chapters in the novel, only five make no mention of noise.[6] The sources of noises are varied, including horses (pp. 532, 725), a goat (p. 539), dogs (pp. 621-22, 768) slaps (pp. 578, 769), gunshots (pp. 621, 643, 782), and a clock (p. 595). The vast majority, however, have a human source. Virtually all of

the characters make noise of some sort (even Le Destin, L'Estoile, and Angélique). Not surprisingly, the greatest individual source is the obstreperous Ragotin.[7] Far more frequent, however, are noises made by collectivities such as "la canaille," "tout lemonde," "l'assistance," "la compagnie," and the participants of the numerous fights throughout the novel. Noise is a universal activity in *Le Roman comique* from which no character, group, or class is exempt.

The vocabulary of noise is suitably varied. First, there are the relatively neutral terms such as "bruit," "noise," and "rumeur." Second, specific sounds proliferate. Laughter is the most common non-linguistic sound. There are many cries and screams, as well as animal noises; we also find snoring, applause, ringing, and crying, among others.[8] Even music can be included, as it is often discordant and/or unexpected (for example, Ragotin's serenade for l'Estoile; pp. 621-22). Interestingly, Scarron never presents noise mimetically (i.e., onomatopoeically); rather, he describes it in the same fashion (and thus at the same remove) as any other event.

With the exception of "rire" (which will be discussed below in detail) and "crier" (an intermediate term), by far the most frequent expression is simply "bruit." The very indeterminacy of the term is significant. A "bruit" is often an enigma, loud and intrusive, signaling an eruption of disorder in the fictional universe, and its source and meaning must be sought out both by the fictional characters and by the reader ("Le Destin continuoit ainsi son histoire, quand on ouit tirer dans la rue un coup d'Arquebuze et tout aussi tost jouer des Orgues," p. 621). Noise is thus incorporated into the narrative dynamic of the text through a linear progression: a. noise; b. search for the source of the noise; c. identification, often followed by resumption of the action in a new direction. Noise moves the reader ahead much as it moves the plot within the fictional universe.

Laughter is the most common noise in *Le Roman comique*. We find its echo in the title, in one of the meaning of the word "comique."[9] Laughter is a primitive human sound, and thus contributes to the earthy, unpretentious atmosphere of the novel. It lends a note of glee, reminiscent of Rabelais. Like spectators of a play, characters laugh at each other's actions and appearance: "[l'accident de cheval] de Roquebrune fut accompagné de grands esclats de risée que l'on fit dans les carosses. Les cochers en arresterent leurs chevaux pour rire leur saoul" (p. 644). Laughter is the only sound made by the "fou" who jumps on Le Destin's horse,

and becomes an almost automatic response whenever Ragotin enters the action.[10] In this novel, laughter is often a group activity, implying common values and group ties. It thus has a social function, isolating the individual who doesn't laugh, or who is the butt of the others' laughter (Roquebrune above; most commonly, Ragotin).

The greatest number of noises occur in those parts of the novel which deal with the troupe's experiences in and around Le Mans, that is, in the primary or frame narrative. In particular, the overtly comic episodes frequently include some jarring auditory components. This is the case in the scenes with La Rappinière and the goat (screams, p. 540), La Rancune and the *pot de chambre* (screams, curses, and the sound of La Rancune relieving himself, pp. 545-546), La Bouvillon at dinner (repeated gales of laughter, pp. 706-07), and Ragotin and La Baguenodière (shouts, laughter, and the cries of an entire row of spectators toppling over, pp. 768-70).

Certainly one may associate the large number of noisy scenes with the burlesque character of the work, but this explanation alone does not adequately account for the emphasis on noise. In d'Assoucy's *Aventures burlesques*, for example, noise occurs far less frequently and does not play a role in the development of the action.[11]

Furthermore, noise is not limited to the comic episodes in *Le Roman comique*. As the novel progresses, the examples of noise occur more frequently. This increase is most dramatic in both the Spanish novellas and the autobiographical stories told by the characters. In the first Spanish story, "L'Amante invisible," there are no noises, *per se*, but only the breaking of silence ("la rupture du silence." p. 561; "elle [Porcia] rompit le silence," p. 564); in "A Trompeur, trompeur et demi," the only sign of noise is Victoria's crying. In the last two Spanish stories, however, the references to noise multiply. "Le Juge de sa propre cause" contains the same types of noises as are found in the rest of the novel: "cris," "crier," "bruit des combattants." At the same time, however, there appears a term which occurs only twice elsewhere in the text: "soupir," "soupirer." Hardly loud or discordant, it is a standard sentimental sound, and thus well suited to the tone of the Spanish novellas. Ironically it serves as a reminder of the incident, eleven chapters earlier, in which La Caverne's story was interrupted by the sighs of a dog. Noise links the world of the actors with the romantic heroic world of the Spanish stories. And such links are not merely ironic. Léandre - only three pages after the dog episode - sighs as well,

every bit as heartsick as Sophie in "Le Juge de sa propre cause." The fourth story, "Les Deux Frères rivaux," is again linked by common noises to the rest of the novel: "le bruit du combat," "bruit du coup de pistolet," etc. Thus noise, more naturally associated with the comic episodes, progressively infiltrates the romanesque universe of the Spanish stories, bringing about a gradual and subtle integration of the two radically different fictional universes.

The same progression toward increasing noise exists in the autobiographical narratives. The first part of Le Destin's story contains only crying (which may or may not involve noise) and a negative formulation: "sans faire de bruit" (p. 582). In the second part, noises multiply and frequently echo noises in the primary narrative: "Verville s'en mit à rire" (p. 606), "le bruit de ma cheute" (p. 610), "le bruit des épées" (p. 610), "Verville fit un grand cri" (p. 612), etc. The same holds true in the third part: "toute la canaille... se mit à rire" (p. 633), "j'oüys une grande rumeur" (p. 635), etc. Léandre's brief tale limits noise to crying, but in La Caverne's narrative there are fourteen passages pertaining to noise, centering around laughter, cries, and tears. The importance of noise in this last autobiographical narrative is probably related to social class: La Caverne was raised in the socially questionable milieu of actors and actresses, while Le Destin and Estoile give indications of a more genteel background. La Caverne is thus less tied to the romanesque and more to the world of the primary narrative where noise abounds. Yet her story bears some resemblance to Le Destin's: an attack by bandits, a rich gentleman, a dead father, and a missing brother. In short, noise seems to have infected the autobiographical narratives, serving to link the three seemingly discrete universes: the present of the troupe, the past of its individual members, and the fiction of the Spanish novellas. While other types of links between the three have been found,[12] noise itself engenders a subtle dynamic of coherence.

In a very different vein, Scarron uses noise as a means to achieve a transitional jump between a character's story of his past and the return to the primary narrative. It is in the strategy that Scarron's novelistic use of noise differs most strikingly from that of his contemporaries. Noise is no longer simply a descriptive accompaniment to the narrative action, but itself a sign of that action, rupturing the smooth linear narrative, and reorienting story events.

Just as Scarron never finished the novel, several of the characters' stories either do not end, or encounter considerable difficulty in doing so. Noise is often the source of the interruption which breaks off or threatens to break off the stories. It thereby disrupts narrative closure, which is itself closely allied with the notion of coherene. Le Destin's story is interrupted three times by some form of noise: first, before he can even begin, by a fight in the next room (pp. 577-78); second, by the clock striking 2 AM (p. 595); and finally by the simultaneous aural onslaught of an arquebus shot and organ music (p. 621). These noises provide convenient breaking points for Le Destin's story, which is too long to be presented in the space of a single chapter. They constitute the basis for the rhythm of presentation of Le Destin's narrative. These noises also disrupt the continuity of his story and force an abrupt shift between narrative levels. La Caverne's story is similarly interrupted. However, while Le Destin is later allowed to continue and to bring his story up to the present, the actress's narrative is permanently broken off by the noise of the canine intruder in the darkened room (pp. 685-686). Whether or not Scarron intended to finish this story (or the novel) is pure conjecture. Léandre is able to finish his brief narrative without interruption, but his conversation with Le Destin, which follows immediately, is interrupted by the noise of a fight in the kitchen (p. 692). The end of Ragotin's "Amante invisible" is marked not only by applause, but also by an amusing effort on everyone's part to silence him by speaking louder and louder, and by a laughter-filled game of keep-away with the little man's book (pp. 567-68). These last two instances of noise do not interrupt a specific narrative, but nevertheless produce radical shifts of tone and action between the narrative levels.

The role of noise as interruption is not limited to the junctures between the primary and intercalated narratives. In the very first chapter, Le Destin's presentation of his troupe to La Rappinière is cut off by "quelques coups de poing et juremens" (p. 533), the sounds of a fight over the hay being eaten by the actor's horse. Three plays are interrupted, temporarily or definitively, by noise: in La Caverne's story, *Roger et Bradamante* is disrupted by the infectious rounds of laughter brought on by the page's error in his lines; the troupe's production of Tristan's *Mariane* is aborted by a loud fight, and *Dom Japhet* is interrupted by Ragotin's noisy alteration with Baguenodière.

Noise may thus interrupt the primary narrative, the autobiographical narratives, and the dramatic productions of the troupe. What it does not interrupt are the Spanish novellas themselves.[13] None of the four stories is cut off; their narrators (Ragotin, Inezilla, and La Garouffiere) are allowed to reach the conclusions of their stories without interruption. It would appear that narrative level does not explain this absence of interruption. Like the autobiographical narratives, the novellas are embedded in the primary narrative. Novellas are, however, set apart by their purely fictional status, as well as their social and geographical distance from the world of the actors in the primary and autobiographical narratives. The plays performed by the troupe are also fictions, but the circumstances of their production are not. There is virtually no description of the action of the plays, whereas the Spanish stories are recounted in their entirety. Thus accounts of the performances belong to the primary narrative, and are not embedded as separate fictions. The fictional world of the novellas is marked by completion, wholeness, and coherence, while the "real" world of the provincial theatrical troupe is characterized by fragmentation, rupture, incoherence.

The use of noise in *Le Roman comique* is linked to Scarron's experience as a playwright. Indeed, the theater is a more likely domain for noise than the novel, in large measure because of the mode of presentation. In a dramatic context, noise is an independent semiotic system which can function alone or in conjunction with other such systems.[14] In the novel, there is essentially only language, and yet here noise, through language alone, achieves an almost dramatic status.

Scarron, as a dramatist, mastered the craft of "bruitage," and has transferred this skill to the novel.[15] There are specific similarities between his novelistic and dramatic treatment of noise. While noise does not play as great a structural role overall in his *Dom Japhet d'Arménie* (1653), a central scene of the play (III, 4) places "bruitage" in the foreground. Scarron uses three techniques, two of which find their equivalent in *Le Roman comique*. First, the commander and Dom Alvare, staging a comic welcome for Dom Japhet, use language as noise, uttering interminable banalities for the express purpose of preventing Japhet from speaking. The actors in *Le Roman comique* do essentially the same thing: when Ragotin announces that he will read them a story, they repeatedly change subjects to stop him from speaking (p. 552). Second, in the play, an arquebus is fired, again in welcome, next to

Japhet's ear. There are several examples in the novel of loud noises having a comic effect, but the most direct echo is Ragotin's adventure on horseback during his rifle goes off accidently, scarring both mount and rider, and leading to additional comic permutations. The third manifestation of noise in *Dom Japhet* involves a haranguer who coughs and sniffles repeatedly as he talks; such accoustic interference with communication is difficult to reproduce effectively in a novel, and has no equivalent in *Le Roman comique*

Another of Scarron's techniques reminiscent of the stage involves the relation of noise to space. In theater, noise may broaden the space of the stage, extending the fictional realm simply by being situated offstage (a knock, a gunshot etc.) Even though the novelist does not suffer from such spatial contraints, Scarron employs noise in a surprisingly theatrical fashion, often presenting the source of a noise as situated "elsewhere" (the novelistic equivalent of offstage), and using it as a pretext for the shift of scenic space. During the episode of the innkeeper's traveling corpse, la Rancune and Ragotin have just returned to their beds when they hear loud female shrieks coming from downstairs in the inn (pp. 698-99). The action moves downstairs to the screaming women and the missing corpse. The example is fairly typical. The noise triggers the shift of narrative action to the scene of the noise. The result is a contingent and jerky spatial movement of the narraive which undermines the coherence of the novel by suggesting that the narrator "doesn't know where he is going."

Thus noise generates and links coherence and incoherence in *Le Roman comique*. Noise reinforces the structure of the novel by providing a distinctive rhythm which parallels other structuring rhythms such as the alternation of main action and intercalated narrative, the various interventions of the narrator, the movement between seperation and reunion, theater and life, even sleep and waking.[16] The repetition of laughter, shrieks, interruptions, noises of all kinds becomes a unifying element in the novel.

At the same thime, noise functions to create incoherence. It erupts within each of the levels of fiction: the main action of the novel, the stories told by characters of their own earlier adventures, and the Spanish stories. Through repeated interruptions of the first two levels, noise impedes the linear development, contributing to the fragmentation of the novel, and thus rendering it less coherent. Noise also serves as the trigger for movement

within the novel, signaling and often causing shifts in physical place and narrative level. Indirectly addressing the question of coherence and incoherence, Jean Serroy has said of *Le Roman comique* that "la seule loi de ce monde, qui devient l'axe même du roman, c'est le mouvement."[17] The movement to which Serroy refers is not an orderly one, but the confusion of the traveling stretchers, the chaotic search for Angélique, Le Destin's and L'Estoile's odyssey from France to Italy and back, and the wandering provincial theater troupe.

Noise like movement, promotes both coherence and incoherence in the novel. The result is a tension between the two, a teasing seesaw between perceived patterns (coherence) and disorder (incoherence). Noise both provides a rhythm to *Le Roman comique* and repeatedly disrupts the narrative: the tension between the two roles is never resolved.

NOTES

[1]According to a very informal poll, it would seem that only professors of French whose field of interest is the seventeenth century have read *Le Roman comique*. The same question of exclusion from the canon is posed by Furetière's *Le Roman bourgeois*, and was discussed at the 1986 Banff meeting of the North American Society for Seventeenth-Century French Literature.

[2]Henri Coulet, *Le Roman jusqu'à la révolution* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1967), p. 206; Antoine Adam, *Histoire de la littérature française au XVIIe siècle* (Paris: Editions Mondiales, 1962), II, p. 145; Gustave Reynier, *Le Roman réaliste au XVIIe siède* (Paris: Hachette, 1914), p. 268. The accusations of incoherence are, however, not as strong as those leveled against Furetière's *Roman bourgeois*. See Michèle Vialet's detailed and incisive discussion of the concept of incoherence and the seventeenth-century novel in "Economie de l'incohérence romanesque: *Le Roman bourgeois* de Furetière," Diss. University of Pennsylvania, 1985.

[3]Maurice Lever, *Le Roman français du XVIIe siècle* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1981), p. 154; Jacques Truchet,

"*Le Roman comique* de Scarron et l'univers théâtral," in *Dramaturgie et société*, ed. Jean Jacquot (Paris: Editions du CNRS, 1968), pp. 263-64; Jean-Pierre Chauveau, "Diversité et unité du *Roman comique*," in *Mélanges Mongrédien* (Paris: Société d'Etudes du XVIIe siècle, 1974), p. 165; Coulet, p. 207.

[4]Joan DeJean, *Scarron's Roman comique: A Comedy of the Novel, a Novel of Comedy* (Berne: Peter Lang, 1977), p 30; Jean Serroy, *Roman et réalité: les histoires comiques du XVIIe siècle* (Paris: Minard, 1981), p. 472; Peter V. Conroy, Jr., "The Narrative Stance in Scarrons's Roman comique," *French Review*, 47, Special Issue No. 6 (1974), p. 24.

[5]All citations are from Antoine Adam's edition *Romanciers du XVIIe siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1958). For the purposes of this study, only the first two parts, which were written by Scarron, will be used.

[6]I, ix; I, xix; I,xxi; II,xii; II,xviii.

[7]Above all, he screams; he also swears, sings, and snores (in descending order of frequency). He rarely laughs, but incites much laughter in others. Overall, his noises are sounds of frustration and alarm.

[8]The term "bruit" apears 42 times, "rumeur": 12, "noise": 3, "clameur": 1. "Rire" occurs 65 times, "risée": 2. Under the heading of cries and screams: "crier": 39, "cri": 25, "hurler": 8, "hurlement": 4; animal noises: "aboyer": 5, "soupirer": 3, "hennir": 1. Finally, the sounds of snoring: 3, crying: 21, ringing: 2, and applause: 2. A few of the terms require some additional comment. "Crier" is frequently associated with language (24 of the 39 occurrences are accompanied by some linguistic content). It is an intermediate term, between pure noise and language. Furetière gives as the first definition of "crier": "eslever la voix avec violence, faire des cris." It is worth retaining this term precisely because it challenges the boundaries between language and noise. Language becomes noise. In the same vein, although more closely allied with language, rather than noise, are "jurer": 15, and "jurements": 3. "Pleurer" often constitutes noise in the context of this novel by virtue of its volume: "ils emmenoient avec eux une femme qui pleuroit bien fort et qu'ils avoient bien de la peine à faire taire" (p. 673).

[9]Serroy, in discussing the title, calls *Le Roman comique* a "roman enfin à faire rire." p. 519.

[10]The association between the fou and Ragotin is reinforced by the similarity of the terms the narrator uses to describe them. The fou is "un paysan de leur village qui estoit devenu fou et qui couroit les champs" (p. 673), while Ragotin is "le plus petit fou qui ait couru les champs depuis Roland" (p. 551).

[11]While laughter does occur on a number of occasions in the *Aventures burlesques*, it is less frequent than in *Le Roman comique*. The majority of the other examples of noise involve music; in fact, a number of the references to the sounds of music are lyrical, rather than burlesque, in tone. In any event, noise in d'Assoucy's novel does not interrupt or fragment the narrative action.

[12]Most scholarship on *Le Roman comique* addresses this very issue, at least in part. See especially Serroy.

[13]One might say that the novellas are interrupted by narrator interventions, but these comments and short digressions do not change their direction. It is interesting to note that while instances of noise become more and more common in the novellas, the narrator's interventions become progressively less frequent.

[14]It is one of the thirteen semiotic systems in theater detailed by Tadeusz Kowzan: language, tone, gesture, mimicry, scenic movement of actors, make-up hairstyle, costume, accessories, decor, lighting, music, and noises (*Littérature et spectacle* [The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1975], pp. 182-204). "Bruitage" as a semiotic system can be manifested in several ways: it may be found in the didascalia, suggested (or implied) in the dialogue, or left to the director's choice.

[15]Serroy has signaled the importance of dramatic technique in this novel: "cet art du découpage et du montage;... ce goût de la chose vue," as well as the use of noise: "cette maîtrise du bruitage (Scarron aime à faire donner des claques et à faire sonner!)" (p. 215).

[16]Indeed, an article has been written on the role of sleep in this novel: Nancy G. Carter, "The Theme of Sleep in *Le Roman comique*," *Romance Notes*, 11 (1969), 362-67. Interestingly, noise is on several occasions presented in conjunction with scenes of sleep, either interrupting sleep (La Rappinière and the goat, or Ragotin's nocturnal serenade, for example) or preventing it (La Rancune and the chamber pot.).

[17]Serroy, p. 442.

la Caverne et sa Fille, qui parurent avec de la lumière, virent Destin et lui firent voir qu'il était en chemise de sept personne en chemise. *Chap. XI.*