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Fall 2007

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The Jazz Critic as Flâneur

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“I love to watch you play,” a reporter once said to Duke Ellington during a television interview. As Ellington gracefully moved up and down the keyboard, he replied, grinning wistfully, “Playing? I’m not playing . . . I’m dreaming!”¹ For the poet Jacques Réda, whose most famous works such as *Les ruines de Paris* (1977) and *Amen* (1988) chronicle his experiences as a modern *flâneur* in a Paris which is sometimes overtaken by what Marc Augé has labeled *surmodernité*,² or an anaesthetizing over-abundance of technology and empty modern spaces, Réda has also led another life as a jazz critic, often writing for the French monthly *Jazz Magazine*. As a respected jazz scholar and an admired poet, Réda has maintained that his love for jazz is strictly separated from his poetic endeavors, almost reserving it as his private space far removed from the pressures of the Parisian literary world. As Réda himself has declared, rather angrily in fact, just because a person might have two different fields of interest, it doesn’t necessarily imply a connection between them, as they can be perfectly compartmentalized:

Il est difficile d’aimer des choses très différentes – par exemple les œufs à la coque, *La divine Comédie*, le football, sans qu’un jour on vous interroge sur le rapport qu’il peut y avoir entre ces goûts. Il est aussi difficile de répondre, et encore plus de répondre simplement: *Il y a moi*, parce que c’est immodeste, parce qu’en outre, un moi qui se fragmente et s’éparpille de telle manière manque forcément de sérieux.³

Rejecting any causality in tastes or sometimes contradicting artistic inclinations, Réda mocks those who are quick to write theses on the inner workings of his soul: “Le sérieux consisterait à prétendre qu’on aime les oeufs à la coque parce qu’on aime Dante, Dante à cause du football, et à montrer comment et pourquoi ces liens paradoxaux ont pu s’entretisser dans la logique de l’âme” (*Bitume*, 65). And yet, just as Ellington thought of his playing as “dreaming,” the beauty of Réda’s jazz writings seem indeed spiritually intertwined with his notions of the *flâneries* as dreamy, improvised wanderings through cities. Moreover, just as the notion of improvisation can be seen both as a musical idiom and a metaphor for the sense of freedom

the *flâneur* feels when he roams, the notion of the *flâneur* also helps Réda understand and describe the virtuosity of such artists as Duke Ellington, Sweets Edison and Dodo Marmarosa. Dreams like memories serve Réda well as he invents his own idiosyncratic jazz alphabet made up of blue notes, “le mot juste”, and populated by such mythical and metaphorized creatures as Dodos (and other birds); confectionary figures such as “Sweets”, and royal houses led by Dukes, and Kings (of Swing).

If Ellington spoke of playing as dreaming, it would of course not be considered a wild Freudian leap to assume that Réda’s dreaming can be “playing” as well, as when riding a train reminds Réda first of an Ellington tune, “Daybreak Express,” then of a pivotal childhood memory. In his prose poem “Steamin’ with Duke”, the rhythm of the old train Réda is riding suddenly becomes a syntactical bridge to his unconscious which is triggered by his associations with other train-related Ellington songs such as “Happy Go Lucky Local” and “Build that Railroad.” As the train chugs along and Réda’s thoughts merge with the train’s cadence, stops along the way become iconographically linked to events of his past:

Maintenant encore la vieille micheline obéit au rythme ternaire qui m’a soulevé. De halte en halte: Sontavy, Cheilly-les-Maranges, Dennevy- les été d’autrefois s’ajoutant, peuplés de fantômes à ce convoi qui traîne sous les vignes, dans les souvenirs, mais qui roule et qui roule à ce rythme où le bat le pouls de la vie, le swing profond de l’instant. (110)

The train takes him on a journey through his own past, his musings on the Ellington tunes inspire thoughts of renewal and optimism in him, as he associates Ellington’s vision of trains with a Whitman-esque faith in progress and enterprise. Réda becomes jubilant as he speculates how Ellington must have written “Daybreak Express” around the same time as Réda himself first started playing imaginary games with trains as a young boy. As such, Ellington’s express becomes a metaphor for the birth of his own creative impulses through play:

Je me plais en outre à supposer que ce *Lightning* est contemporain d’une de mes premières tentatives artistiques car c’est en composant dans la salle à manger de Grand-Père un extasiant train de chaises [...] que je découvris le pouvoir du jeu et de l’imaginaire. L’arrachant au chaos rêveur de ma préhistoire, ce train était littéralement une création et une mise en ordre du monde. (111)

The train’s slow but steady beat functions as a type of “riff” for Réda who sees the train as the mnemonic link that connects Ellington to Réda’s childhood, as if it facilitated a profound, melancholic Proustian mechanism within him. As he explains

“Happy Go Lucky Local” manages to set off two emotional itineraries in him: “Très exactement nostalgique et pathétique avec l’intense effort que l’alto et la trompette solistes s’imposent comme pour rouvrir une obstruée par l’oubli [...]. La première n’est encore qu’une remémoration plaintive des temps perdus” (112). Yet, just as Ellington allows for a fleeting regaining in Réda’s mind of his childhood memories, he also allows him to fuse that early French bourgeois upbringing with a mystical vision of the American South, placing them through an exalting lense: “Mais avec le motif de piano, qui joue comme un déclic au commencement de la seconde, voici que le songe prend comittance et que le petit train mélancolique aborde joyeusement le Sud profond de la mémoire. Voici le nouveau Santenay, Cheilly-les-Maranges, Dennevy” (115).

Playing, dreaming, the present and the past all converge during Réda’s train moment as if the nostalgia that Ellington evokes in him could also be one of Jazz’s major roles as well. Indeed, if Réda has a particular fondness for Jazz heroes who were before his time or who died young, it is because he also feels a fondness, even a duty, to defend spaces or concepts which have vanished or are in the process of vanishing. As in his poetry where he will describe architectural jewels of the nineteenth century hidden or surrounded by a morass of ugly modern edifices, jazz is somehow able to capture moments or eras that are hard to regain. As he walks through Paris, for example, he marvels at how easy it is to bridge the gap from one world to the next for those who have a keen sense of these things: “Il suffit de raverser la rue, et, le hasard aidant, au delà du porche d’un grand immeuble dont la banalité le préserve, on tombe contre un jardin qui garde un morceau de temps perdu.”⁴ But jazz, as Réda knows so well, had a tough time rebounding from the commercial blow the emergence of Rock and Roll and the Beatles had on the music scene in the sixties which almost relegated it to museums and libraries. This is why the train, as a medium, is so particularly meaningful for Réda who sees speed and convenience as exemplified by plain travel, swiftly replacing the quaint but slower pleasures of the railways. As he muses, when thinking of how Ellington and his band must have romantically criss-crossed the country by train:

Loin de l’Express invincible du point du jour, cette mise en gloire de tortillard a lieu à une époque où l’avion, qui vient si massivement de gagner la guerre l’emporte sans appel sur la locomotive en tant que motif d’inspiration [...]. Amputé de surcroît, par l’électricité et le diesel des ses attributs fantastiques, le train cesse d’être poème en acte, associant le rêve et la puissance dans sa prosodie à pistons. (Bitume, 115)

Sadly, Réda concludes, he must put away his locomotive fantasies and childhood memories aside and return to the realities at hand: “Relegué dans le domaine du souvenir et de la légende, il lui faut rentrer au pays” (Bitume, 113).

If for Walter Benjamin, “the now is the most intimate image of what once was,” Réda’s fascination with the fleeting aspect of nostalgic spaces is similar to a musician’s quest for the very right musical phrase, or even the famous “blue note.” Réda, in fact, uses the color blue in his poetry in order to describe the most potent moments or landscapes. In this way, the jazz musician and the poet share the same craft, each seeking the perfect syntax to convey what is indeed often so difficult to convey. Discussing why Bud Powell’s music has such an effect on him, Réda writes that no other musician could impart such inner despair and ruin as powerfully. For this reason, when Réda finds a cheap second hand copy of one of Powell’s records, he is unwilling and unable to listen to it when he gets home. As he explains, he needs to feel worthy of the right emotion to listen to it properly: “Je ne l’écouterais pas ce soir, ni sans doute même demain, mais à tel moment où j’aurais du moins l’illusion d’avoir droit à ce pathétique, ou j’en aurai besoin pour me rappeler à quel point l’homme peut être innocent, démoli (je songe à *It Never Entered My Mind* de Bud) [...] Et sauvant jusque dans ce malheur l’espoir incapable de comprendre. Mais je n’en dirai pas plus.”⁵

This “je n’en dirai pas plus” is significant in the sense that, for him, not speaking or writing is just as important as coming up with the right word or note. This is what he so appreciates in Sweets Edison whom he compares to a “grammarian” rather than a poet, and whom he admires for his exactitude, balance and grace. As much as he admires the unbridled impatience and unruly exuberance that he sees in Roy Eldridge, Edison is emblematic of what Réda considers to be the highest form of craftsmanship: the art of almost Zen-like precision which, like an arrow, always hits his mark: “Ses mots justes prennent place dans les phrases sobres et parfaitement équilibrées, où l’on n’a jamais à chercher quel verbe appelle quel complément.”⁶ Indeed, Réda uses grammatical imagery to underline the similarity between Edison’s musical art and that of the poet for whom each word must be the exact one, with no margin for error: “Ce que joue Edison ne laisse pas de marge à l’interprétation. Car au contraire des musiciens qui ont souvent l’air de broder autour d’une idée ou de commenter leurs sentiments, il se borne à l’énoncé exact et suffise de phrases qui ne veulent rien dire d’autre que ce qu’elles disent et disent leur perfection” (114). Yet, while Réda’s description of Edison’s concision borders on the clinical at times he ends his commentary with a purely emotional and imaginative image: “Cette prééminence de la épure où l’air circule, discrètement teinté de bleu” (114). With the ethereal “air” imagery that Réda uses so frequently to describe his own floating through Paris “comme un nuage,” he ends on an ethereal note, as if to corroborate the fact that, for the poet as for the jazz musician, the lyrical *and* the disciplined must go hand in hand.

It is in his writings on Dodo Marmorosa, however, that Réda’s poetic descriptive skills truly takes off as in Marmorosa, he sees the perfect mixture: the intensity of the

virtuoso and the elliptical qualities of the dreamer. Even Marmarosa's nickname, "Dodo," is replete in metaphorical associations of flight and whimsy that Réda uses so well to analyse his own activities as a *flâneur*: "Il est certain que le virtuose à part aux réussites du poète, qu'il a pourvu de moyens, et que leur opposition n'apparaîtra pas souvent aussi touchée. Mais elle explique les flottements typiques d'une manière qui, de l'indécision même, tire un surcroît de liberté." Indeed, Marmarosa is a "rare bird," as Réda is fond of calling him, perhaps even a sort of jazz soul mate, as he often describes him in *flâneur* terms: "De son pas qui sonne clair, il arpente déjà un paysage qu'on ne distinguera jamais que par échappées et qui doit tout à la fantaisie du promeneur" (257). Pacing, wandering, escaping: the *flâneur*'s footsteps are transposed onto Marmarosa's piano keys, just as Réda, the poet, seeks out the suburbs in such Jazz inspired works as *Beauté sururbaine* (1985).

Marmarosa is one who is drawn to the surprise moments of beauty interspersed within the quotidian. Réda recounts rare anecdotes of Marmarosa's contemplating rays of sunlight at the bottom of his emerald green bathtub, or stopping in the middle of the street in order to listen to a church bell ring, or to wait for birds to wake up at daybreak. Onomastically, Réda is taken with Marmarosa's aviary imagery because he sees in him an artist capable of reaching incredible aesthetic heights: "Ce n'est pas seulement la beauté des choses qui nous fascine, mais aussi le fait qu'elles puissent exister. Et quand Marmarosa restitue cet émerveillement dans sa musique, c'est presque toujours sur le ton d'un *pourquoi?* qui prendra d'ailleurs les nuances divers de l'insolite, du rêve, de la mélancolie." Dreamer and virtuoso work synergistically to create what Réda refers to as a "décalage stroboscopique" from which "Il exprime pleinement la vérité" (264).

As such, Marmarosa goes beyond simple talent, or even musical genius. Like the poet, he sheds light on truths that may have been overlooked. His musical space becomes intensively personalized as each aspect of his piano playing feeds off of the other: "[C'est un] jeu qui semble ouvrir au virtuose l'espace du rêve, et doter de virtuosité la fantaisie du rêveur" (264). For Réda, Marmarosa's overwhelming desire for bird-like flight and escapism is at the essence of his genius, it is even a "mode habituel" of the pianist in general; yet what makes Marmarosa particularly interesting for Réda is not only his need to escape, but, consequently, his need to escape "capture", to escape unnoticed: "C'est pourquoi," Réda notes, "les plus belles escapades de Dodo se produisent en milieu orchestral, en fort contraste avec la vigilance presque agressive de son accompagnement" (274). Hiding within an orchestra, Marmarosa can get away with whimsical idiosyncrasies without detection as opposed to the soloist whose every movement is under scrutiny. Similar to the delight Réda feels in sneaking away from the city center towards the suburbs where he can feel free and alone despite being surrounded by buildings and people, Marmarosa furtively drifts from the orchestral

unit “comme on marche à pas de loup” (274), with a gentle spacing between notes, without fully drifting away and returning with a tinge of sadness for what might have been had he been able to let lose completely: “Une mélancolie les suit, une nostalgie de ce point qu’elles atteindraient peut-être s’il ne fallait pas trop vite revenir, ou si le but n’était pas l’escapade elle-même, avec sa loi de flânerie qui ne doit pourtant pas s’attarder” (276).

Similar to the Baudelairian *flâneur* for whom there is no greater thrill than taking a “bain de la foule,” Marmarosa, like Réda on the outskirts of Paris, enjoys flirting with escape within the orchestra “collective.” Yet contrary to the economical discipline that Réda admired in Edison’s work, for example, Marmarosa is all the more poignant in that he actually did disappear off the music scene “en suivant le cours de ses tonalités vagabondes” (274) as if one of his musical flights went too far.

In *Recommandation aux promeneurs*, Réda writes: “J’affectionne les lieux déshérités.”⁸ As he navigates the nooks of Paris, he finds stolen moments to take a break from the stresses of urban life. Yet, can the same be said for his affection for the jazz greats that he is obviously not alone in admiring? It is not the jazz musicians themselves or their music that make Réda’s writing about them so unique, but rather the fusion of his own sensibilities onto them. By using one art form to describe the other, Réda creates a new kind of jazz critique, simultaneously grounded in jazz scholarship and French literature. As Jean-Claude Pinson has remarked, Réda is so effective in bonding with the musicians he writes about for the same reason he is so successful in catching snap-shots of beauty within Parisian every day life: he is simply open to them. “Être au monde, ça n’est donc pas simplement être contenu en lui qui nous déborde de tous les côtés. C’est être ouvert à lui, offert à son passage au jeu de ses métamorphoses.”⁹ As he often describes himself in vaporous terms, “un homme nuageux”; “un bloc poreux et transparent/ un libre songe humain,”¹⁰ Réda is also keenly aware of similar transformations in the musical notes his jazz heroes play. Although Réda has certainly scoffed at analogies between his jazz criticism and his poetry, he has also emphatically come out in favor of such connections between other French writers and jazz:

A ceux qui demanderaient où se situe le rapport [...] il n’y a pas lieu de répondre puisqu’ils n’ont pas d’oreilles. Montrons leur peut-être Reverdy enregistrant avec Joseph Reinhardt et Philippe Brun, ou bien Claudel, Ambassadeur en Amérique, dans le moment où Hawkins allait quitter Fletcher Henderson pour l’Europe. La poésie à l’état pur crépite dans ces échanges inaperçus.¹¹

Just as Marmarosa was able to hide behind his orchestra when he attempted his musical flights (rather than bring attention to himself with solos), Réda too can be elusive as he juggles the mysteries of American jazz with the complexities of French poetic culture. Yet, similar to the jazz musicians he metaphorically “riffs” with – as if he were in some late night club with them – Réda remains true to his personal “blue note” whether in his own poetry or in the music of his soulful jazz writings

Notes

1. Quoted in Ken Burns’ film series, *Jazz*, PBS Home Video distributed by Warner Home Video, 2000.
2. In his book *Non-lieux*, Augé defines *surmodernité* in terms of: “l’accélération ou le renforcement des facteurs constitutifs de la modernité, et par n trip excès (d’informations, d’images et d’individualité) créant dans les secteurs technologiquement les plus avancés de la société les conditions pratiques de l’instantanéité et de l’ubiquité dont parle Paul Virilio,” quoted in Marc Augé. *Fictions fin de siècle, suivi de Que se passe-t-il*, Paris: Fayard, 2000, 124.
3. Jacques Réda, *Le bitume est exquis*, Saint-Clément-la-Rivière: Fata Morgana, 1984, 65.
4. Jacques Réda, *Château des courants d’air*, Paris: Gallimard, 1986, 35.
5. Hervé Micolet, *Lire Réda*, Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1994, 267.
6. Jacques Réda, *L’improvisiste: une lecture du jazz*, Paris: Gallimard, 1990, 114.
7. Réda, *L’improvisiste*, 201. 8. Jacques Réda, *Recommandations aux promeneurs*, Paris: Gallimard, 1988, 91.
9. Jean-Claude Pinson, *Habiter en poète: essai sur la poésie contemporaine*, Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 1995, 70.
10. Jacques Réda, *Recommandations aux promeneurs*, 13.
11. Jacques Réda, *Celle qui vient à pas légers*, Saint-Clément-la-Rivière: Fata Morgana, 1985, 8.

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