

## Poetry, Swing and Jacques Réda

### I. Poetry and Swing

One of the distinct pleasures of reading French writer Jacques Réda's work is the buoyant *élan poétique* that coexists with his sense of melancholy and lightens it. Réda draws much of his inspiration for integrating this pulse into his work from jazz. In his numerous essays on jazz, he explores how musicians speak through their instruments much as poets speak through words, tapping into a spiritual and rhythmic current that surrounds us in our daily life. He examines how the physical act of playing music relates to our insistent need to master time. He shows how engaging with the world's anonymous forces, in music as in poetry, is a way of asserting one's aliveness in spite of the inevitable movement toward death. In writing about the pianist and composer Thelonious Monk, for example, Réda suggests that although we try to grow and move forward as if in harmony with time, time resists and works against us:

[L]a musique de Monk fait apparaître la sauvagerie fondamentale du temps. Fugitivement domesticable, fallacieux auxiliaire de nos travaux, il reste l'inflexible agent de la cassure et de la ruine. (Réda 1985b, 201)

If we cannot control time, we can nonetheless develop our own unique relationship to it, like Monk does in his angular music, pausing in odd places and jabbing out blue notes as if sparring with a stubborn partner. If we cannot find a center around which to construct our lives, we can at least find ways to coincide with time's unfolding, as guitarist Freddie Greene did in the famously tight rhythm section of the Count Basie band when quietly making his guitar respond to "l'énigme insoluble qui nous effare" (Réda 1980, 166).

Jazz is freedom music. It celebrates the present moment, conveys consummate vitality as a response to adversity and to the hidden forces that we cannot control. It embodies an "aesthetic of exploration" (Gilbert Seldes and William James, cited by Ann Douglas in O'Meally 1998, 208-209) rather than of revelation, of contrasting tensions rising and falling rather than unity presupposed. As in the case of Monk, Greene and Basie, it requires sensitivity, endurance and patient strength. It involves constant attention paid to the spirited, elegant rendering of time's passage. It is a dynamic way of expressing one's personality as a musical conversation or dialogue, a way of seeing "[t]he self not as noun but as verb" (Nathaniel Mackey, in O'Meally 1998, 522), as a work in progress that develops in relation to others and to the outside world. Poetry as Réda describes it likewise requires a singular rhythmic feel in order to express one's relation to world, Other and self. It provides a means of coming to terms with time's passage, in a physical as well as metaphysical sense. It reminds us that true poetic being requires bringing inner and outer worlds into balance, what Réda calls "accorder le plus intime de sa rumeur à la rumeur universelle" (Réda 1995, 119). The poet and the jazz musician alike help us keep pace with a center that is always in motion in and around us. Like what Yves Bonnefoy describes as "l'équilibre d'un instant entre la mesure et la démesure" (Bonnefoy 1992, 180), but with the instant that might grant us repose always unfolding beyond our grasp, poetry and jazz liberate us by infusing us with the energy necessary to undertake this bold task.

The idea of swing as Réda applies it to writing has interesting repercussions. In jazz, first, swing involves both a world view and a particular technique. On the one hand, swing is deeply rooted in African forms of non-conceptual thought. It relates to the goal, common to other African art forms, of infusing equal life to different parts of a whole (Olly Wilson, in O'Meally 1998, 82-100). It is a means of harnessing vibrant energy and distributing it evenly

over time but in slightly unpredictable ways. On the other hand, as the technique of creating tension by placing regular emphases ahead of or behind the main beat, swing is closely tied to dance, especially the way African dance emphasizes supple movement across a continuum of strong and weak beats (ibid). As it developed in America, swing was a means of imitating the swaying of hips in minstrel shows, nightclubs and dance halls. In big-band jazz, musicians adapted the beat to the ways the dancers in front of them would move. The exuberant physicality they observed, likewise integral to the music, was the average person's means of living in the here and now, the slight irregularity of beats turned into a propulsive norm. The human heartbeat, with its swaying systolic/diastolic alternation, was given outward expression. Through jazz's swinging musicians and dancers, we find material proof that a constantly evolving tension of opposites can at least seem to propel us forward.

In poetry, meanwhile, Réda likewise engages in a meaningful encounter with time. He harnesses the world's energy by coordinating the flow of words on the page. He privileges the supple movement of lines and stanzas in order to convey the experience of immediate, sensual contact with the outer world. Formally, he lends importance not so much to particular words as to a larger context in which they appear. Through setting, images and rhythmic feel, he emphasizes as much as possible the feeling of actually walking through the world. He simplifies to basics – rhyme, relatively consistent line length, diction both literary and familiar – rather than asserting radical newness. He introduces contrastive, changing elements but within a regular overall pattern. The use of contrasting elements creates hesitation – between light and dark, sound and silence, present and past – and makes the unexpected seem inevitable, in the manner of a jazz musician adapting a highly personal statement to a relentless, impersonal beat. He describes the poet as "ce commutateur indispensable" (Réda 1985a, 58), a switching mechanism

capable of setting the world's energy into play. As with jazz, the music of Réda's poetry is "savante-populaire" (ibid), reflective of wisdom that comes from the heart, the hips and the vagaries of everyday life as much as from the mind.

In sum, swing is a special blend of hesitation and propulsive forward motion. As it applies to Réda's poetry, it is a form of action: the dynamic interplay of contrasting elements as a response to time, as an attempt at immediacy. Réda's poetry 'swings' not only because of its rhythmic feel, but also because it expresses the excitement of being alive even when the world escapes us. Réda embeds various kinds of contrasts into his poetry as a means of recreating our physical, sensual movement through the world. Even if we cannot influence what goes on around us, he suggests that we can at least directly and vitally attune ourselves to it. He emphasizes hesitation and suspension as inevitable aspects of our existence in relation to the outer world. His poems reveal how movement, flux, and the tension of opposites can in themselves be invitations to step outside the self and participate in events' unfolding.

## II. "L'E muet" and Line Length

As Réda explains in *Celle qui vient à pas légers*, the French language inherently lends itself to a swinging feel thanks to the *e muet*. In everyday speech, as opposed to the formal, carefully pronounced literary French of classic versification, the *e muet* can either be left unpronounced or exaggerated somewhat, depending on regional accent, personal preference or the emotional emphasis one wants to convey. As a result, various useful tensions arise in terms of sight and sound. As Réda describes it, "L'E muet est en effet une valeur rythmique variable ou irrationnelle de la langue, laquelle s'entête à contaminer tout ce qu'on écrit" (Réda 1985a, 68). He suggests that because literary French makes "la prononciation même mentale" of the *e muet*

technically obligatory, the poet can place these vowels strategically, toy with our expectations, and add special rhythmic emphasis or bounce to a line (ibid, 63). In the most general sense, rhythmic tension arises when we encounter *e muets* that we feel we should or shouldn't pronounce according to the rules of classical French or our own habits and preferences. Because contemporary poetry allows for great freedom in versification, the line between classical French and everyday French in terms of pronunciation can become hazy. Integrating spoken French into verse, as Réda does, in itself blurs boundaries between the literary and the everyday.

Similarly, regional accents can greatly alter the way *e muets* are exaggerated or elided. In southern *langue d'oc* French the *e muet* has a tendency to be exaggerated when people speak, while in northern *langue d'oïl* French the *e muet* is often swallowed by surrounding consonants. This brings us to duration, an aspect of spoken French throughout France – though Réda focuses primarily on "notre français nordique moyen" (ibid, 69) – which further nuances the seeming regularity of a line of verse. The various long and short durations an *e muet* can take on have a pneumatic effect on versification (ibid 69, 72, 75). Whether "bien pleins ou réduits à l'état de soupirs qui propulsent" (ibid, 72), a poem's *e muets* add an effect secondary to the meter, altering it slightly through the pauses and prolongations they encourage. When an *e muet* seems to prolong sounds that precede it, for example, a musical "vibrato" can result (ibid). When a syllable is accented, moreover, a tonal rise can take place. Réda argues that this aspect, though often overlooked in criticism, further adds to a poem's musicality. Réda's experiments with 14-syllable line lengths also help bring his poems closer to spoken French. Because they allow for extensive yet subtle incorporation of *e muets*, such lines allow him to better contrast meter with pronunciation and thus to make his poems swing. Thanks to the placement of the *e muets*, this longer verse allows for an impression of regularity even when the actual syllable count is above

or below the number of syllables we are made to expect (ibid, 88). Although he uses other line lengths as well, the slightly off-balance quality of the 6-8 and 8-6 combinations in 14-syllable lines perfectly captures the sad yet swinging *flottement* that he typically describes. We see how what Philippe Jaccottet calls "une prosodie, une syntaxe, un vocabulaire du secret" (Jaccottet 1987, 295) is formulated when daily routine takes center stage.

### III. "Deux vues de la Butte-aux-Cailles"

In "Deux vues de la Butte-aux-Cailles," a poem in two parts in Réda's 1982 collection *Hors les murs*, Réda observes the weighted atmosphere and mundane goings-on in a neighborhood in Paris's thirteenth *arrondissement*. I will focus here on the first of the two parts, where the speaker stops in at a shoe-repair shop to buy shoe polish he doesn't need in hopes of participating in "la vie du quartier" (Réda 1982, 21). In this and other poems from the section entitled *Le parallèle de Vaugirard* (Réda 1982, 7-25), Réda uses "[des] vers de quatorze syllabes mâchés qui, suivant le parler usuel au nord de la Loire, éliminent à la diction la plupart des e muets" (ibid, 107). Through transcription of speech patterns, the 'average' person caught up in small errands turns urban routine into ritual. However, the jazz-like swing of the dense 14-syllable lines, in which the speaker's unpronounced *e muets* add an extra element of rhythmic push and pull, keep this bittersweet verse from being an entirely solemn affair. With his emphasis on "le parler usuel au nord de la Loire" (ibid, 107), Réda sets in relief in a French way what African-Americans have long known: how giving 'swing' to everyday life can be a response to a world that doesn't always welcome us.

In *Celle qui vient à pas légers*, Réda defines the *e muet* loosely, as any "e" that speech patterns related to literary or familiar register might lead us to pronounce or leave silent as we

see fit. I will first cite "Deux vues de la Butte-aux-Cailles" in its entirety, placing in parentheses the *e muets* that could be pronounced but aren't and outlining the metrical pattern in order to show other kinds of pauses that occur. I will then highlight the tensions created between literary and popular speech forms, and show how the accentuation pattern breathes fresh life into a familiar poetic form. With the exception of line 3, which is an alexandrine, the accentual patterns I have signaled by marking the *e muets* allow this poem to be read in lines of 14 syllables, as follows ["(e)" = elided; "/" indicates a caesura]:

Au fond j(e) n'ai pas besoin d(e) cirage, // mais j'entr(e) chez l(e) cordonnier  
 afin d(e) participer un peu // à la vie du quartier,  
 apparemment si douce // au printemps quand l(e) jour tombe,  
 comme on dit alors que s'élève un r(e)gard à peine plus sombre  
 dans la lumière nimbant // les gens transfigurés qui vont  
 d'un éventaire à l'autre // avec des sacs à provisions  
 et des enfants stridents et mous // valdinguant loin derrière.  
 Car une mansuétude(e) sans bornes // envahit l(e) coeur des mères,  
 un abandon qui les rend lourdes // et les fait savater,  
 fondre et sourire à rien, // sinon à cette ombre d(e) clarté  
 qui s'est faufilée auprès d'elles, // en précaire équilibre  
 entre la Butte enténébrée // et la nuit pâ(e) qui vibre,  
 par quell(e) porte encore entrouverte ? // (Mais vous baissez les yeux,  
 vous parlez d'autre chose et vous // ralentissez au lieu  
 de perdre absolument la tête // et cett(e) grand(e) modestie  
 dont la porte a fait preuve elle-même, // battant comme on oublie,  
 tandis qu'à votre insu déjà // vous sombrez dans les coins  
 et que j'emport(e) c(e) tube de cirage // dont j(e) n'avais pas besoin.) (Réda 1982, 21)

The speaker in "Butte-aux-Cailles" is absorbed in his surroundings yet separate from them, observing what happens outdoors while standing inside a shop. What he purchases is ultimately replaceable, tangential to his goal of participating in neighborhood life. That he is testifying in some way, recounting an episode as one might to a friend or acquaintance over drinks, is made clear by the poem's first words: "*Au fond.*" Réda uses this expression here in an

emotional sense, to assert resignation. The word choice of the opening line – spoken almost *in medias res* – establishes a conversational tone and familiar register. Like the verbs "valdinguer" and "savater" that indicate the energy behind the strange processional taking place outside, the elided e's of phrases such as "j(e) n'ai pas besoin" and "chez l(e) cordonnier" [emphasis mine] then endow insignificant events with a distinct energy. The quirky rhythms they create elegize the commonplace. Once we accommodate ourselves to these somewhat unexpected rhythms, we find that they also reinvigorate poetic conventions. Whereas phrases such as "au printemps quand l(e) jour tombe" and "un r(e)gard à peine plus sombre" [emphasis mine] could be considered literary clichés, the elided e's place them at the level of the everyday and thus recontextualize them.

Moreover, the speaker's self-consciousness carries the poem forward. This poor innocent's awareness that he is missing out on something becomes the poem's keynote. By writing down his observations, the speaker recreates some of the *douceur* of which he has heard. The verb "s'élève" in line 4, for example, reflects both the sights and sounds that rise from the city streets. The almost imperceptible rise and fall of emphases around the elided e's plays a critical part in this rising up of presence, closely echoing the actions the speaker observes. Poetic speech here becomes a means of validating those odd moments in life that seem on the surface to have no special relevance yet carry great meaning if one takes the trouble to look and listen closely enough. Poetry allows the speaker to "parle[r] d'autre chose," to speak of something besides his own heaviness and solitude. It is a means for speaker and reader alike to "ralenti[r] au lieu / de perdre absolument la tête." Like the cries of the "enfants stridents et mous" and the "abandon" which makes the mothers "lourdes," the rhythms and rhymes constitute a tentative effort at reassurance. They oblige us to "sourire à rien," to smile at the light of presence

threading its way among us "en précaire équilibre." In line 10, the e's in the phrase "cette ombre d(e) clarté" [emphasis mine] reenact this precarious balance, this tentative movement that unifies light and the subsequent onset of darkness. In line 12, the hesitation over pronouncing e's in the phrase "la nuit pâl(e) qui vibre" [emphasis mine] likewise aligns poetic speech with an illuminating movement between light and dark. The several elided e's in the poem's final line mark the speaker's weary emotional state as he accepts a certain pointlessness, the eventual closing of yet another symbolic door.

Réda's love affair with the world unsettles him, inspiring a relatively passive acceptance of its continual changes. Through poems, essays, and more recently, short novels, he returns some of the love offered and communicates the range of emotions that being alive inspires in him. The language and jazz-influenced rhythms he uses reenact the precarious kinds of balance we are always having to strike and the pleasure involved in doing so. They allow a modulation of the great energy with which the world unfolds, and show that we can and do play our small part in this process, even if only as secondary characters, accomplices in a secret, inexpressible task. Somewhat in the manner of a Charlie Parker or Sonny Rollins cascading references from his horn, the poet offers a foothold of sorts to help us adapt to events, a concrete way of gauging and incrementally furthering our progress. Like musicians mastering their craft, we gain the poise and courage to align ourselves with time passing as it gracefully goes by.

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An early version of this article appeared in *Chimères* XXVI:1 (Spring 2002), published by the Graduate Student Organization of the Department of French and Italian at the University of Kansas.