

Jacques Réda and Jazz: Making Poetry Swing, or Being There, Almost

Aaron PREVOTS

I. Poetry and Human Experience

The French poet Jacques Réda is fascinated with how the world's anonymous forces can surface as poetry at any time and in the unlikeliest of places. In his view, poetry is in fact synonymous with these forces, occurring continuously and simply waiting for us to take note. It is as if the world were engaged in an ongoing dialogue with itself, with the poet simply allowing us to better listen in. The poet taps into and provides an added outlet for the world's immanent, ubiquitous energy. Poetry is understood to be already taking place, well before pen is put to paper in an effort to take note of and regenerate its flow:

[A]vant de se déposer par miracle dans l'écriture, [la poésie] demeure en suspens dans la vie où son taux élevé reste immuable et perceptible à chaque instant. Il suffit de se donner la peine de respirer. Fatalement très peu de livres captent à l'état pur cet oxygène (Réda 1985a, 54).

Réda suggests that human experience can be, in itself, poetic, fluid, and musical. Poetic speech heightens our sensitivity to and reinforces these qualities. To Réda, poetry is more a recreation of the world's continual movement than an enactment of progress towards any clear goal. If

anything, it guides us toward a fruitful abandon of the self, so that the world can more fully speak through us. It includes the reader in a community where powerlessness can be transformed into the strength of greater receptivity and a more acute perception of our place in the world. We are reminded of how external forces shape us, and are made to feel these forces as directly and immediately as is possible through words.

The particular attention Réda pays to prosody helps make presence felt. In his view, what writers too readily leave out from contemporary poetry is a tempo or rhythm that recaptures the sensual feeling of aliveness. As a result, the poetic act can seem more a burden than a pleasure; what he depicts as the obligation to fill pages taking the place of the freeing, liberating effect that coinciding with the world's unfolding entails. Réda's description of Paul Claudel's *Connaissance de l'Est*, in which he admires Claudel's ability to convey the 'thickness' of the earth's substance engaged in an act of self-knowledge, provides one example of Réda's ideal:

On marche, on mâche. Auprès de celui qui fut le saint Paul de ce prophète "À l'état sauvage", on assouvit la faim qu'avait célébrée une chanson de Rimbaud. Tout participe de la substance terrestre, incluant le ciel, et à laquelle on s'incorpore aussi, simple étincelle d'intellection dans son épaisseur en acte de se connaître. On fait même plus que comprendre : on est compris, situé dans le mouvement que le monde accomplit sans arrêt pour exister (Réda 1995, 45).

Here, in a passage which reveals much about Réda's own conception of poetry, Réda identifies the poetic act with knowledge gained progressively through physical effort. Earth, sky and humans participate equally in this effort. The reader accompanies the writer as if walking alongside him or her. The writer captures the sweep, breath and spark of the world's coming into presence, choosing words that both convey this continual movement and allow us to literally savor it. We experience a special kind of unity, not so much observed within the poem as attained by integrating ourselves into its flow, which is in fact the world's materiality expressing itself, offering itself to be enjoyed.

Réda writes to capture the immanent, ambient "poésie à l'état pur" (Réda 1985a, 58) that is always taking place around us. However, he suggests that reader and writer are included in the movement toward presence to the point of being absorbed in it, separated to a certain extent from the self as metaphysical entity. The self becomes less poised and

distinct, more floating and dispersed. We attain an equilibrium by taking part in and bearing witness to this dispersal by coinciding with presence's ebb and flow. In spiritual terms, we participate in what could be termed a materialist "semaison": the world's matter or substance is made to circulate, the human mingles with the divine, but no grain of hope is planted that might blossom into a more profound sense of unity in our lives. There is dispersal, but not necessarily growth. Awareness of our impermanence becomes our strength, but strengthens us primarily to endure. The movement to which the poem gives shape becomes itself the fragile equilibrium which sustains and carries us. This is Réda's version of poetic immediacy: interaction with active, dynamic, transformative principles that makes Being more present but which in doing so inscribes into the poetic space our own precarious floating and uncertainty.

II. Poetry and Swing

One of the distinct pleasures of reading Réda's work is the buoyant *élan poétique* that coexists with his sense of melancholy and lightens it. His prose and poetry have a pulse to them that make them uplifting, even when we are made to doubt that they might summon lasting presence. Réda draws much of his inspiration for integrating this rhythmic lift into his writing from jazz, an African-American art form that privileges immediacy. In his essays on jazz, he explores how musicians speak through their instruments much as poets speak through words. In particular, he examines how the physical act of playing music weds itself to the metaphysical conundrum of mastering 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 rough, 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. "C'est tout ce que

l'énigme insoluble qui nous effare enjoint: va, confonds-toi, devient mon propre mouvement, comme celui qui sans rien dire écoutait sa guitare lier le temps de son passage à l'infini du temps" (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" (O'Meally 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" (O'Meally 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 gracefully coming to terms with time's passage in a physical as well as metaphysical sense. It reminds us that true poetic dwelling 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. It is like what Yves Bonnefoy describes as "l'équilibre d'un instant entre la mesure et la démesure" (Bonnefoy 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 particularly 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 (O'Meally 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, in particular 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. He creates a spirituality of the moment that reflects as much our uniquely human passage through the world as a hope to interact with the divine in some way.

In sum, swing is 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. Although he does not suggest that a sense of lasting plenitude can be achieved, he employs various techniques that, together, provide greater access to the real. Even if we cannot influence the outer world, Réda suggests that we can at least directly and vitally attune ourselves to it. In particular, Réda 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 the world's unfolding. His formal innovations express in intriguing, animated ways both the difficulty of being in the world and the tentative ways we move toward presence. He lends a poignant, welcoming musicality to his poems despite his cynical world view.

III. "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). This special emphasis can occur in numerous ways. 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 a 14-syllable line length also help bring his poems closer to spoken French. Because they allow for extensive yet subtle incorporation of *e muets*, Réda’s 14-syllable 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.

My intention here is to argue that technical aspects such as the *e muet* and line length add a dynamic pulse to Réda’s work that propels us forward into the world even as we are made to feel puzzlement at the human condition. Whereas in contemporary French poetry silence in the form of short lines and blank spaces is often used to express what speech itself can’t seem to say, Réda’s poetics achieves a similar goal but by actually incorporating familiar speech rhythms. His poetry achieves immediacy by recreating the tension between the world’s fluid movement and our own efforts at taking part in this movement. He creates a poetic space where, on the one hand, beings and things come into presence, and, on the other, humans hesitate slightly and have trouble entering this flow. In his view, immediacy can only occur in this approximate way. He shows that we participate in the world’s unfolding and derive pleasure from doing so, even as we effect change in only limited ways. He shows that we become attuned to the small kinds of presence that can seep up as poetic speech through even the most insignificant encounters. We inhabit the poetic space of his poems as a crossroads between Being and our own existence as beings. We impose order on the outer world even as we recognize that this order is only fleeting. We learn to feel more a part of the world even as a true justification for our existence escapes us. We see how what Philippe Jaccottet calls “une prosodie, une syntaxe, un vocabulaire du secret” (Jaccottet 295) is formulated when daily routine takes center stage.

IV. "Deux vues de la Butte-aux-Cailles"

Réda's poetry shows us that looking for a center can take place relative to all manner of places and things. Poetic space need not be concerned with the strictly elemental to help us orient ourselves relative to presence. 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 would like to focus here on the first of the two parts, in which 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). Although this bittersweet scene is in itself touching, or even comic in a macabre sort of way, what makes this verbal snapshot of the *Butte-aux-Cailles* all the more unusual is the voice in which it is rendered. In this and other poems from the section entitled *Le parallèle de Vaugirard* (Réda 1982, 7-25), Réda experiments with "[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). We come to understand a somewhat sociological aspect of the poetic process, namely how people really speak, how the average person communicates with others. We see how speech patterns and the geographical places in which they arise can play a key role in the movement toward presence.

In "Deux vues de la Butte-aux-Cailles," Réda takes urban routine and turns it into ritual. Beyond the setting itself, "la vie du quartier," poetic speech makes us feel firsthand how managing on a day to day basis can in fact be a form of dwelling, how Being also expresses itself in the tedium of everyday life. Thanks to the singular way in which speech patterns are transcribed, we see that the 'average' person caught up in small errands can still have the ability to discern and recreate a movement toward presence. 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, shows that conveying presence need not be an entirely solemn affair. With his special 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 everyday life a particular 'swing' 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. In order to better examine how the various *e muets* in this first of the two "vues de la Butte-

aux-Cailles” add a special pulse, I would like to cite the poem here in its entirety. I have placed in parentheses the *e muets* that could be pronounced but aren’t, and outlined the metrical pattern in order to show other kinds of pauses that occur. Following Réda, I would argue that the primary tension created here is between literary and popular speech forms, and that the most important thing to initially notice is how the accentuation pattern breathes life into a familiar poetic form. As we progress, we shall gradually see how the speaker’s unique voice allows him to participate in communal actions through writing. Though situated apart from his fellow humans in real life, observing their actions from within the shoe-repair he has entered (!), by relating the events poetically he finds a way to join the movement toward presence. By capturing a rhythm that matches the “précaire équilibre” of the world’s unfolding, he humanizes this unfolding. He shows that the hesitations we experience in our use of language constitute an integral part of our attempts to dwell poetically. He points to poetry as action by helping even relatively humble forms of poetic speech coincide with the world’s movement. With the exception of line 3, which is an alexandrine, the accentual patterns that 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 mansuétud(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 faufilee auprès d’elles, // en précaire équilibre

 entre la Butte enténébrée // et la nuit pâle(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).

“Butte-aux-Cailles” ritualizes the ordinary. The speaker enters a physical space but to attain a goal about which he seems uncertain. He is absorbed in his surroundings but does so by being separate from them, observing what happens outdoors while standing inside a shop. The object involved in his ritual is ultimately replaceable and in a way tangential to his goal of participating in neighborhood life. A keen eye and a flair for speech are his sole means of taking part in the movement toward presence from which he is initially separated. That the speaker 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, “*Aufond.*” Réda uses this expression here in an emotional sense, to assert resignation at having to confront basic practical concerns. The word choice of the opening line – spoken almost *in medias res* – establishes the conversational tone and familiar register that make the elided *e muets* all the more appropriate once we adapt to reading the poem as it was meant to be read. 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] endow insignificant events with a distinct energy. The quirky rhythms they create serve to elegize the commonplace. Once we accommodate ourselves to these somewhat unexpected rhythms, we find that they also serve to reinvigorate poetic conventions more broadly. 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 clichés, the elided *e*’s help recontextualize literary traditions and place them at the level of the everyday.

Moreover, the speaker’s self-consciousness helps carry 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 particular relevance, yet in fact 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 in our own way “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 onset of darkness that follows it. In line 12, the hesitation between pronouncing and not pronouncing the e’s in the phrase “la nuit pâ(l)e qui vibre” [emphasis mine] likewise aligns poetic speech with an illuminating movement between light and dark.

The poetic space that the speaker creates slowly expands to intensify this hesitant light. On the one hand, the relatively long lines are themselves the light described in line 5, gradually unfolding around the reader, transfiguring him or her as he gathers the successive images the poet has to offer. Although alexandrines can have a similar effect, the alternation between measures of eight and six syllables here adds special emphasis to the idea of a “précaire équilibre” between light and dark. On the other hand, the poem’s overall frame or structure could be said to also encircle speaker and reader and suffuse them momentarily with light. The brief opening statement is followed by an intensification of the speaker’s comments on the actual scene. Like the door mentioned in lines 13 and 16, the bulk of the poem focuses on this lingering opening up of a threshold. Our presence at this threshold diminishes slowly as the parentheses are introduced, then fades suddenly with the intensity of a door closing. Forgetting takes the place of presence. The speaker takes with him the object he didn’t quite want or need and an experience that will recede. In short, the movement toward presence here is also a movement toward death. The people whom the speaker has observed could offer stability, yet they are now already a part of the past. The “comme on dit” of line 4 has been proved true, the world’s gentleness has indeed been shown to exist, yet the mysterious “r(e)gard à peine plus sombre” [emphasis mine] takes precedence without our quite knowing how. As the poem closes, the several elided e’s mark the speaker’s weary emotional state as he accepts his life’s pointlessness, the eventual closing of yet another symbolic door.

Réda's love affair with the world unsettles him, inspiring a relatively passive acceptance of the world's continual changes. In writing poems, however, he is able to return some of the love that is offered him and communicate the range of emotions that being alive inspires. Most importantly, the specific kind of language he uses reenacts the precarious balance that we are always having to strike and the pleasure involved in doing so. It allows a modulation of the great energy with which the world unfolds, and shows that we can and do play our small part in this unfolding, even if only as secondary characters, accomplices in a secret, inexpressible task. Thus we see that the path toward presence is not purely a metaphysical one. Rather, language offers a foothold of sorts as we continually adapt to events in the real world, a concrete way of gauging and incrementally furthering our progress. Poetic speech helps us both keep track of time passing and align ourselves with it as it goes by. We are reminded that our position in language echoes our position in the world, and we learn to rethink the attention and careful poise necessary to profit from these dynamic relationships.

Brown University

Works Cited

- Bonnefoy, Yves. *L'Improbable et autres essais suivi de Un Rêve fait à Mantoue*. Paris: Gallimard, 1992.
- Jaccottet, Philippe. *Une Transaction secrète, lectures de poésie*. Paris: Gallimard, 1987.
- O'Meally, Robert G., ed. *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*. New York: Columbia UP, 1998.
- Réda, Jacques. 1985a. *Celle qui vient à pas légers*. Saint-Clément: Fata Morgana, 1985a.
- . *Hors les murs*. Paris: Gallimard, 1982.
- . *L'Improviste, une lecture du jazz*. Paris: Gallimard, 1980.
- . *Jouer le jeu*. Paris: Gallimard, 1985b.
- . *La Sauvette*. Lagrasse: Éditions Verdier, 1995.