Book Review: Matthew F. Jordan: *Le Jazz: Jazz and French Cultural Identity*
Rosalind Silvester
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What is This?
(understandably) hesitant the editors have been to attempt a truly classificatory presentation or grouping. On first reading it seemed to me that many of the essays could have easily been otherwise shuffled among the parts, even those appearing to represent the most contrary approaches or currents. For instance, why not place Francis Ponge within the cluster combining ‘Traditions and modernisms’, and Blaise Cendrars within the ‘Avant-gardes’, rather than the other way around, as the editors do? But I do not mean this as a criticism of the book’s structure. It is always better to propose some kind of order than none at all, and enthusiastic and committed readers of French poetry will, in any case, want to read the book straight through to discern the many formal, thematic and methodological links that tie pieces together both inside and outside the four groups. Most interestingly, perhaps, teachers and students will be tempted to establish new correspondences or groupings of their own.

Thus, I would strongly recommend this book not only as an ideal reader for all courses on modern French poetry, but also as a marvellous addition for other kinds of courses in modern French and/or comparative literature focusing on topics richly studied in this volume: for example, courses examining literature’s relations with other art forms (brilliantly addressed here from different perspectives by Peter Collier on Valéry, Timothy Mathews on Apollinaire, Stephen Romer on Reverdy, Béatrice Bonhomme on Deguy, Jean-Pierre Bobillot on Heidsieck, Andrew Rothwell on Noël, and Michael Bishop on Titus-Carmel), or courses connecting language, cultural identity and natural or urban landscapes (links beautifully treated here by Charles Fordsick on Segalen, Mary Gallager on Saint-John Perse, Roger Little on Senghor, Jean Khalfa on Césaire, Mary Ann Caws on Dupin, Jean-Pascal Pouzet on Glissant, Susan Harrow on Réda and Thanh-Vân Ton That on Nguyên Hoàng Bao Viêt). All of the essays in this anthology teach in one way or another the nuts and bolts of literary analysis, and many, such as Philippe Met’s on Ponge and Victoria Best’s on Bonnefoy, offer rich if contained discussions of French philosophy’s conjunctions with poetic theory. There are no uninteresting pieces in the collection, and a remarkable proportion of the poems and critical readings are true gems.

Mary Lewis Shaw


In Le Jazz, Matthew F. Jordan investigates the meaning of jazz for the French public, music critics and cultural commentators over almost half a century, from its first manifestations in the early twentieth century to its assimilation into French culture during the post-war period. By drawing on critical theory and cultural history, he gives depth to his extensive research and textual analyses without diminishing the readability of the account. Part of the author’s ease of communication is due to his playful use of musical expressions: he frequently describes, for instance, motifs and common perceptions in the history of jazz as ‘discursive riffs’ and uses the idea of a ‘vamp’ to set up and then develop his major currents of thought in Chapter 1. Arguing that French identity changes over time, Jordan is concerned with tracing the evolution of the reception of jazz in a
country whose national identity was re-evaluated by two world wars and whose initially strained relationship with popular culture became synonymous with the struggle for modernity.

Each of the chapters addresses a number of fundamental and interesting themes in the light of the prevailing political and social climate in France. The debates about the ontology of jazz and the attitudes towards its miscegenation are seen as a constant preoccupation, allowing music critics and social scientists to give voice to a range of theories concerning the origins of jazz – whether it was introduced by French settlers in New Orleans and had a Celtic origin, or arose out of the spiritual songs of African slaves on American plantations, or whether those same slaves had appropriated Protestant hymns.

Related to these discussions is the ongoing questioning of the ‘Frenchness’ of jazz and of what it contributed to French culture, the answers seeming to differ according to the epoch. Jordan shows that, although it was at first considered a threat to national identity by traditionalists and those on the political right, jazz was eventually assimilated into popular culture by the late 1940s, largely as a result of the younger generation embracing ‘la musique nègre’ as well as ‘white jazz’, imitating dances like the cakewalk and making a cult out of individual performers, such as Josephine Baker and Louis Armstrong, and movements like swing. The increase in the number of touring jazz bands, the proliferation of new dance venues and the creation of specialist journals also added to the popularity of this type of music. A turning point in attitudes towards jazz appears to have been the Second World War, during which ‘being swing’ or ‘being Zazou’ symbolized resistance to Vichy moral order and the forces of the Occupation. Indeed, the word ‘Zazou’ came to denote a subculture and the rallying cry of the young generation (p. 189), as swing became more political and more overtly oppositional. As the author writes, those supporting swing became ‘a symbol of the importance of a tolerant and balanced French way of life’ (p. 228), a symbol which was not relinquished after the war and which henceforth signified that jazz was equated with liberality and freedom.

Equally central to the book is the presentation of key figures influencing the different stages of jazz in France and their degrees of acceptance by the public, music critics and literary/cultural theorists. As many of the performers were African-American, assertions were made about the authenticity of their music compared to the less ‘hot’ style (p. 142) perceived by some critics to be produced by many white/European performers, though both were prone to the commercialization and mechanization of the industry. Included in this cult of personality was the occasional music critic, such as Hugues Panassié who dominated music writing in the 1930s and was involved in running Le Hot Club, a private club where ‘true jazz’ could be enjoyed (p. 155). By presenting how certain powerful people like Panassié assessed jazz and thought about its relation to the commercial musical world and the values created by this cultural phenomenon, the author interprets this discourse on jazz alongside two other types of discourse, dealing with (as we have seen above) the values and tastes of dominant bourgeois culture and the social function of the music for its particular following. The resultant cognitive mapping, as Jordan states, ‘is useful for contextualizing French debates on jazz as they fit into a wider context of public discourse on music’ (p. 7) and, importantly, it brings together the various themes and analyses into a coherent whole, thus providing the major strength of the work. In addition to the rigour of the theoretical framework, strengths appear elsewhere
too, namely the adept assimilation of a copious amount of secondary material, the ability to convey enthusiasm for the subject matter in an academic, yet accessible, writing style and, lastly, the creation of a work appealing to anyone, layperson and scholar alike, interested in French cultural studies.

Rosalind Silvester

*After the Fall: War and Occupation in Irène Némirovsky’s *Suite Française*


Drawing upon close readings of the novel and historical sources, Nathan Bracher has produced a subtly written though provocative cultural study of Irene Némirovsky’s best-known posthumous work, *Suite Française*. Subtle for its nuanced analysis of key passages and characterizations, and provocative for its focus on questions of ideological underpinnings, historical responsibility, and ethics within the context of the German occupation of France and the Vichy regime, *After the Fall: War and Occupation in Irène Némirovsky’s Suite Française* is a welcome addition to a growing body of criticism.

By grounding her narrative style, characterizations, and plot in their time period and cultural sources, Bracher renders a great service to readers unfamiliar with important social or historical references. He is equally justified in saying that ‘*Suite française* constitutes an eminently literary text whose richly composed, multifaceted narrative must first and foremost be analyzed [as opposed to its truth-value as testimony] in relation to the literary and ideological contexts of its time’ (p. xi). Bracher brings together narrative artistry and historical commentary in order to tease out from the novel’s alternating viewpoints a stinging condemnation of opportunism and Pétainist ideology and a reflection on self and other within the scope of national pride and duty. Beginning with Part I, ‘Tempête en juin’, he situates Némirovsky’s portrayal of the mass civilian exodus in relation to other contemporary accounts. Especially rich is his examination of the text’s historicity and of the challenge it poses to posterity’s need for ‘heroes’ and ‘innocent victims’ (p. 94). Bracher’s analysis of Part II, ‘Dolce’, elucidates *Suite française*’s complexity against Vercors’ classic *Le Silence de la mer*. The comparisons of Madame Angellier and Lucile and of Lucile and the seamstress constitute a perspicacious analysis of the role of class identity and conflict with respect to relations between French women and the Germans. Bracher’s conclusion in Chapter 3 — regarding Némirovsky’s undercutting of ‘tendentious interpretations of the catastrophe’ and ‘critical distance from such discourse’ (p. 97) — is just as pertinent here. Finally, through a discussion of Emmanuel Lévinas’s philosophy of otherness, Bracher gives an ethical basis to Némirovsky’s main protagonist and epic tale of private citizens faced with public exigencies. This last chapter highlights Lucile’s humanity in her choice to accept, in spite of her feelings for a German officer, the responsibilities and risks of helping a compatriot who has thrust himself into armed resistance.

Bracher’s discussion of negative criticism the novel has received — for its silence on the Jewish question and failure to condemn Nazi or Vichy policies — does more, however, to reveal Bracher’s possible uneasiness with Némirovsky than to offer clarification. Bracher provides useful historical background to explain the apparent lack of political