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Jacques Réda's *The Ruins Of Paris*

John Taylor

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Jacques Reda. *The Ruins of Paris.* Translated by Mark Treharne. London: Reaktion Books, 1996. 138 pp. £10.95.

For nearly a decade, Jacques Reda's books have been my *livres de chevet*—"bedside books"—that I dip into whenever I need to refuel my enthusiasm for examining the world, for experiencing the fullness of passing moments, for loving life. Born in 1929, he is indisputably one of the most invigorating French writers, a contemplator full of whimsical yet arresting speculations, a widely-and-deeply-read man whose work tenders friendship to all sorts of past poets (as well as to modest craftsmen, erudite wine merchants and passing girls with sea-gray eyes), a dauntless explorer of the overlooked *thing* (whether it be a listless cloud, an antiquated shopsign, a lackluster postcard or an odd cigarette brand), an obstinate describer of the nondescript urban feature (such as bland boulevards, faceless side streets, shrubby embankments, obsolete train tracks or burgeoning anonymous high-rises), and a virtuoso stylist whose emotions range from melancholy to grumpiness, from derision to self-derision, from gentleness to cosmological awe, from spiritual anxiety to childlike candor. In brief, Mark Treharne's lively and engaging translation of *Les Ruines de Paris* deserves a vast celebration—accompanied, why not, by "a plate of raw ham and some Riesling in a heavy glass."

Originally published in French in 1977 (and available in Gallimard's prestigious "Poesie" paperback series since 1993), *The Ruins of Paris* gathers prose poems in which blow heady gusts of personal and literary freedom. R6da overturns the stodgy, the robot-like, the overly-rational, and extols the confusion; and he deftly restores a bit of structure to whatever chaos he otherwise hazards upon. As his train pulls through the Parisian suburbs at dawn, for instance, he peers put upon "a jumbled wreckage of wooden planks and cranes, piles of car bodies and gardens with individualistic potting sheds, underpants on the line, small fires that have been choking in their own smoke since the day before." Yet "amid this disarray," he assures us, "a pattern of secret lives will rally." Then he spies one such life: a young woman walking up a boulevard with a heavy suitcase. "She stops for a second," observes R6da, "and... utterly unconscious of her beauty, forgetful of the overcast day that is floating by her like her fate, she watches the train as it disappears."

Reda indeed pinpoints the miracles in the modern mess. Like Thoreau, he surveys his "own particular imperial territory" and takes note when two cherry trees start to fruit "behind a corrugated iron fence" near the rue des Bons-Enfants and the rue du Plaisir. (The street names, all copied scrupulously from the originals, can be intriguingly meaningful, such as the above, or significantly banal.) Time and again, he finds "the world in its deafness .. . obstinately jubilant"; and such observations stave off, or relativize, morbid introspection. "The sole aim of the world is to glory in itself unceasingly," he proclaims, "and to glorify us too, even amid our despair. . . ." Our duty as humans, these prose poems consequently suggest, is to try to approach—to

restore our cognizance of—the manifold riddles of existence. Or, as R6da sums it up more drolly in a text devoted to the quarter of Belleville: "My occasional pauses in such places initiate me, but into what I couldn't exactly say."

In many of these prose poems, an intriguing tension arises between the man's volition to grasp the world rationally and the utter unknowableness of what he perceives or experiences. Coming across an unsuspected orchard between houses on the rue Marcelle, Reda deciphers as best as he can "the esoteric design of posts, branches and stones." Yet his dominant impression is that of a "voice repeating *you see* and nothing more than that." Such key phrases as "you see" are polysemous, and Reda will pun discreetly, lifting a weary expression from the colloquial idiom and setting it down in a context that makes it burst open, with significance, rather like the "bubbling cool milk" he imagines emanating from "acacia blossoms." "The blossoms," incidentally cautions this poet who relishes extravagant similes yet who also strives—like Francis Ponge—to give common things their full due, "smell like haylofts from a summer of raining downpours... like *Senior Service* cigarettes, the neck of a young girl and camomile—in short, they smell first and foremost like acacias." In another prose poem, he takes the train to Champagne, a region he has already observed many times. But he discovers himself to be "increasingly wide-eyed." "My gaze," he specifies, "is passionately fixed on these easily recognized signs that have not changed but remain as fresh as the ones I am discovering simultaneously, like this small hump-back bridge with neither road nor stream. In fact there is nothing that is not a reason for surprise, or rather for stupefaction." R6da marvels, all the while confessing to his bewilderment. This modesty, both physical and metaphysical, is just one of the lessons that can be learned from a man whose avowed mentors include Jean Follain, Charles-Albert Cingria, Robert Frost, Jorge Luis Borges and countless other writers with a metaphysical bent of mind. How many contemporary authors begin a reading, as Reda always does, by reciting *homages*—selected from the two volumes of his *Reconnaissances* (Fata Morgana)—devoted to the poets whom he admires?

His wistful peregrinations must sometimes overcome disconsolateness, however, a threatening feeling laden with spiritual and perhaps—it is a subtle leitmotif here—amorous doubts. "Despair does not exist for a walking man," he declares resolutely in his opening piece (whose title, "The Stealthy Footsteps of the Heretic," invokes a typical attitude), and from the onset the poet desires to get out of himself and into the world, in this case the outlying arrondissements of the capital and its outskirts. (In the second section, provincial stopovers are scrutinized with equal incisiveness and delight.) Nearly all urban districts charted by him will appear "exotic" to a connoisseur of merely the center of Paris; no mention is made of the Latin Quarter, Saint-German-des-Pres, the Louvre area, the He Saint-Louis or the He de la Cite\ In fact, some proverbially dull, unsightly or sleazy areas resemble, literally, "jungles" in this liberated (and liberating) prose. For a poet who seems never to have stopped imagining like a child, "tigers and boas are rife in the

ranging thickets" near the demolition ramp in the rue Gazan, and "emus, giraffes even, would scarcely come as a surprise" in the "suburban savannah" that he is looking out upon while sitting on a wall and waiting for Bus No. 195. Reda is jesting of course; but he is also provoking fresh looks.

His use of the word "explode" and its synonyms is a revealing stylistic tic, and Reda boldy translates many perceptions with exuberant verbal combustibles. Walking at dusk through a wintry public garden, for instance, he notes that "lightning would be less of a shock than this explosion of unending silence." Later on, the sky explodes "like a mountain, splashing the rooftops and the cobbles with the blue of its living gaze." Synesthesia comes naturally to him (even as it can appear over-deliberate in some French Surrealist poetry); in "That Unfindable Something," one of his funniest texts, which depicts the absentminded writer running Saturday errands (and forgetting the meat and shoes he is supposed to buy for his children), he encounters his fellow poet Jean Grosjean in a tin-soldier shop. Their conversation is interrupted by "the angelus ... as it ripples in sheets of liquid gold from the towers of Saint-Sulpice." This is not the only instance in which sound is transformed into a shimmering substance.

For post-war French poets of similar philosophical sensibilities, "light" metaphorically expresses an attribute of Being into which one aspires to merge; yet Reda—who remains down to earth as willfully as he keeps his head in the clouds—tellingly prepares himself for transcendence by first distinguishing "colors." "I stumble into benches and small bushes," he confesses, "because my gaze is utterly absorbed by a sky as incomprehensible as the approach of love. Its almost faded colour is not definable: a really dark turquoise perhaps, the deep condensation of a light that eludes the eye and becomes the icy fire of the soul it invades."

Such a passage illustrates the tantalizing double movement in his work: on the one hand, his intention to focus on himself, on his relationships or on chance human encounters, and, on the other, his desire to move (rather misanthropically) away from mankind's endless imperfections and to seek out a sort of union, however ephemeral, with pure sensation. He also confronts God and, still more often, a variety of minor pantheistic deities. In this case, religious qualms may be pronounced by this latter-day Job who rides a moped, listens to Bud Powell and sneaks under forbidden fences. One Sunday morning, for example, Reda prowls around the workshops of the Citroen factory, bitterly (and nostalgically) aware of the "inexorable advance" of luxurious high-rises along the Seine. He wanders into the "nave" of a building site and starts "calling out *Ho! Ho!"* "The echo immediately bestows on me," he explains, "the stereophonic favour of the one distinct but disappointing reply of which the Unknown judges me worthy: the sound of my own voice, circling around in this condemned hotchpotch of joists and girders."

In those same Citroen depots, Reda notices "the far from ruffled cohesion of a small body of bits of paper." Is he perhaps alluding to his own collection of prose poems? "Not once did they stop rustling together," he

writes,"... forming two large ritual circles whirling faster and faster, in opposite but concentric directions, gradually reducing space to an empty centre in which one piece of paper, a prey to sudden inspiration, leaping out of the circling motion, came and danced, soon to be caught up again in the whirlwind of circles...." After somersaulting and dive-bombing, the bits of paper eventually land for good, "not without a touch of showing off, amid the applause of the asphalt." *The Ruins of Paris* indeed dizzies as joyfully as it energizes the reader. By the way, a sequel to this vortex of dazzling perceptions is forthcoming in French.

John Taylor