

In Praise of Impurity

Frédéric SYLVANISE

A book on the writings of author and trumpet player Ralph Ellison about jazz music offers an extensive and thought-provoking reflection on Ellison's theory of the condition of African Americans.

Book reviewed: Emmanuel Parent, *Jazz Power: Anthropologie de la condition noire chez Ralph Ellison*, CNRS Editions, 2015, 25 €.

Emmanuel Parent looks into the works of an author who has long been neglected in France: although Ralph Ellison is quite often referred to as the author of *Invisible Man*, a novel he published in 1952 and the iconic value of which has definitely been established, very few people actually know that he also wrote essays. E. Parent draws on Ellison's numerous writings about jazz in order to develop an extensive and thought-provoking reflection on Ellison's theory of the condition of African Americans. By placing music at the heart of American cultural issues, Parent uses it as a prism for reflecting on American culture as a whole and more specifically on modernity in the United-States.

In the first three chapters of the book, the author studies Ellison's period of formation and maturation. In particular, he shows how Ellison was to a certain extent predisposed to develop an original viewpoint of the condition of African Americans. Coming from the Midwest, just like Langston Hughes, Ellison grew up under the auspices of various figures and in an environment that was favourable to artistic development:

A black boy from Oklahoma City, with African, European and native roots, speaking the language of the Jews from Eastern Europe, Ellison grew up in an environment which equipped him for the deconstruction of racial essentialism, whatever its phenotype (p. 26).

Right from his early years, music stimulated him intellectually. As an occasional trumpeter, Ellison had the opportunity to play with various bands: he played with local black jazzmen and at the music school. Quite early, he understood that jazz was much more serious than it appeared and that, contrary to the usual clichés, playing jazz required very hard work. He spent time with future stars like Charlie Christian and Jimmy Rushing and would go and listen to various bands on tour in his part of the country. In 1933, he entered the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, an institution founded in 1881 by the African American accommodationist leader Booker T. Washington, where students were mostly trained in farming. Ellison was not quite satisfied intellectually with Tuskegee and so he left for New York where he started playing music as an amateur while writing critical essays, which gradually enabled him to distance himself from the majority of present and past black writers, with the notable exception of Richard Wright with whom he had a long-term friendship. His stance was not a mere pose. It echoed an idea developed by Henry Louis Gates, according to which black writers are heir to nothing or next to nothing. Ellison does not belong to any black tradition for the simple reason that there is no such tradition:

For black writers, culture is not a familiar place in which a learned intellectual might feel at home, like the dominant class described by Bourdieu in *Distinction*. Culture is not a legacy; it is a skill, a lore that must continually be reinvented for oneself as well as for the group (p. 47).

The author goes back on this notion of «lore» several times in his book as he considers it as a keystone of the condition of African Americans; one that should be distinguished from folklore, which is deeply rooted:

[...] Black lore does not appear as a fixed *content* inherited from a particular group's traditions... but as a *form* through which the dominated affirm their humanity and their autonomy. Black lore might therefore be defined as a strategy, a parry – or even as a performance – conceived in response to the fall in the value of human experience (*Erfahrung*), to the end of ontological certainties and to the social mutations brought about by capitalism and the industrial revolution (p. 154).

The author insists on the conflictual relations between Ellison and the authors of the Harlem Renaissance, the great African American artistic movement that spanned from the 1910s until the mid-30s. He rightly points to Ellison's bad faith when he criticized the movement for being a way for African American artists to humour white people by playing the card of exoticism, and took Langston Hughes's poem "The Weary Blues" as an example of this type of exoticism without giving it a correct interpretation (p. 92). For although Hughes describes the "performance" of a bluesman through a series of clichés about the lives of African American musicians of the time, he debunks those clichés at the very end of the poem by showing that the musician goes home and collapses into bed in complete exhaustion, like any other black worker, thus exposing a tacky exoticism.

During the 1940s, Ellison became aware that he would need to find his own way as he became gradually rejected by the other African-American writers, and in particular, by Marxist critics. Basically, what distinguishes Ellison from other writers is that he seems to have adopted an ambiguous attitude towards America. More than any other African American writer of his generation, he embodied the notion of "double conscience", a concept explored by W. E. B. DuBois at the beginning of the century. Being black and American, Ellison was able to identify the fundamental contribution of black people to American culture without ever losing the sense of belonging to something that precluded essentialism:

Thus, in line with his anthropological approach to music, Ellison considers jazz as the great institution of the Black community, in that it conveyed a complex identity that suffered from a lack of recognition on the international scene and made it known to the rest of the country and the world as being a typical feature of America (p. 76).

E. Parent skilfully explores Ellison's conception of dancing in relation to jazz music and highlights his original way of thinking. Ellison's originality became even more marked in the following years, which led Ellison to pass for a conservative, or even a reactionary, in the eyes of a later generation of African American writers, among which was Amiri Baraka.

In the fourth chapter, entitled "the Black modernist and the native legacy", Emmanuel Parent cleverly compares Ellison's theories about modernity to Sartre's existentialism and shows that, quite unexpectedly, the "African American messianic utopia" is closer to the existentialists' feeling of absurdity than to the Anglo-Saxon puritan ethics, for which salvation is first and foremost a material question (p. 86). He then considers the "African American tragicomic wisdom" as a characteristic of the blues and as a matrix for Ellison's reflection on the notion of impurity, a reflection that E. Parent analyses in a remarkable way

in the following chapters. As an essayist, Ellison appears to be forever going against the current: he objected to “modern” jazz, that is, be-bop and later, free-jazz, on the grounds that it was supposed to be a Black equivalent of serious white music as well as a means to gain some form of respectability, and above all because its advocates pretended it was pure experimentation that did not rely on past work. The fifth chapter is fascinating in every way; it explores the fight between Ellison and Amiri Baraka over the notion of jazz music. While Baraka had a dialectical vision of black music as a continuum, Ellison probably saw it as a discontinuous phenomenon and never had a full overview of it: “The strength of Baraka’s theory lies in his dynamic understanding of black music, which is lacking in Ellison’s work” (p. 117).

In the following chapter, entitled “Purity, Impurity, Mask” and which is probably the most thorough in the book, the author looks into the way Ellison establishes a parallel between the tradition of minstrel shows (also called “blackface minstrel shows”) and the schemes one can find in jazz music. Unlike radical musicians who claim to play free jazz and whose discourse is a plain warning against the violence of power, Ellison prefers the clown mask Louis Armstrong chose to wear, and which enabled him to get so much across, including a degree of subversion (along the same lines, one may establish a parallel between this theory and Henry Louis Gates’ on black vernacular dialect in the poetry of the Harlem Renaissance). Wearing a mask implies a strategy, or even an education:

This confirms, in Ellison’s opinion, the danger lying in the substitution of a clown mask for the mask of a counter-culture poète maudit. He does not mean to deny that the cultural arena is a place of confrontation, of conflict. But he turns things around by highlighting the efficiency of a musical stance that is more subtle and less explicit because it hides behind a mask (p. 130).

E. Parent emphasizes the subtlety of Ellison’s analysis: far from breaking up with the tradition of the minstrels – a form of show that was originally racist but was taken up by black people who appropriated it in a clever satirical way – the jazz musicians kept it alive and even revived it: “Thus, Ellison considers that what makes jazz music so great is the gap between a clownish performance and the tragic substance of the musical discourse. In the absence of this clown mask, the substance will not appear” (p. 144). The parallels Emmanuel Parent establishes between Ellison and Édouard Glissant, in particular in relation to the distinction Glissant makes between “atavistic cultures” (European cultures, for instance, claiming purity of origin) and “composite cultures” (American cultures, which are well aware of their impurity), are also very inspiring and they contribute to building a consistent discourse which runs on in the following chapters, entitled “Of a few manifestations of black lore” and “Beyond race: spreading the lore”, respectively. The study of African American humour is illuminating; Ellison appears as a fine theoretician who paradoxically perceives this kind of humour as being fundamentally American even though it is a survival strategy against the dominant:

Their daily confrontation with absurdity, which for them takes the form of racial relations that are both irrational and inescapable, turns them into proper existentialists. This is the reason why, again, in spite of its specificity, African American humour should not be opposed to the dominant American culture. Indeed, it is an epitome of this culture (p. 160).

Another point of interest of *Jazz Power* is to show that as a theoretician, Ellison keeps evolving; in particular, he gradually refined his conception of a vernacular language without ever depriving it of its dimension of impurity, as opposed to the so-called European purity:

This is the reason why the pragmatist approach of American authors can be said to act as an antidote to the strict formalism that tainted the aesthetics of the great works of XIXth and XXth century Europe [...]. The pragmatism of the black vernacular dialect makes it possible to resist a sacralisation of art and to meet the requirement of a perfect coherence between style, form and function (p. 196).

One might nevertheless and to a certain extent find fault with the way Emmanuel Parent exploits certain notions. Thus, although he aims at demonstrating that Black culture is *the* American culture *par excellence*, when he refers to the “ethnic laughter” of African Americans, he reduces its scope, in that he rests his argument on cultural criteria, which is contradictory. Besides, when he evokes the way some sociologists deal with the “the black problem” (p. 179), he seems to take over an expression Richard Wright had ridiculed by saying that if there was a racial problem in the United-States, it certainly was a “white problem”.

In the last chapter of the book, “Dual consciousness and *Aufklärung*,” the author analyses how, thanks to Ellison’s interpretation of the thought-processes at work in vernacular dialect, it became possible to question Western aesthetic criteria, which are based on an all-powerful reason, by pointing out their ineffectiveness as regards the world of jazz music. Going back to the Enlightenment and to the Haitian Revolution, he makes a fine distinction between “pure reason, with its claim to universality, and the instrumentalization of reason for the benefit of the particular interests of the dominant class” (p. 210). His aim is to dispel certain misunderstandings about the writings of contemporary critics such as Paul Gilroy, towards whom he has an ambiguous attitude since he acknowledges the usefulness of his works but criticizes him for struggling with Hegelianism (and this is an understatement). Even if this was not the main purpose of the book, E. Parent might have chosen to take a clearer stand and examine the reasons why Gilroy’s writings have had such large readership and have so often been used at cross-purposes over the past years, which caused certain debates to go astray.

Except for these reservations, this arduous but brilliant book is highly recommended, if only because it will lead the reader (back) to Ellison, whose influence, even to this day, has been much more important than it is thought to be.

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