

## Les mémoires de nos lauréats

*Selon une tradition désormais établie, nous demandons aux diplômés ayant obtenu les meilleurs résultats dans chacune des langues germaniques de résumer les lignes de force de leur mémoire. Voici les textes que nous avons reçus de nos lauréates 2002-2003.*

### **Cécile Rimbaud :**

#### ***Toni Morrison's Jazz Fiction***

The title of Toni Morrison's sixth novel, *Jazz*, was an important factor in my decision to write about the novel. Reflecting upon this title, many questions came to my mind. Does the title refer to the structure of the novel and, if so, how is jazz used as a structural device? Is there any relationship between the jazz-like form of the novel and the novel's content? Does the use of jazz music alter the content or the 'message' which the novel might convey? How can one compare music and literature and what are the methodological and theoretical problems this approach involves? These are some of the questions which guided my analysis of the novel and which, gradually, led me to consider various aspects linked to jazz music and examine Morrison's use of jazz devices, both at the level of the form and the content, as well as the consequences this may have on the interpretation of the novel.

From the start, I assumed that Morrison's novel was a jazz text, and in my study of jazz and blues in *Jazz*, I draw several parallels at the level of improvisation, performance, polyphonic structure, rhythm and sounds. A central concept to my analysis is the concept of improvisation. Jazz's principle of composition relies on improvisation, which allows the musicians to create/compose the piece of music at the same time as they perform it. Morrison's novel was not, of course, created this way by the author. However, *Jazz* includes a metafictional dimension with the presence of an I-narrator who is creating the story as she is telling it.

The novel is also characterized by the apparent presence of several other narrative voices. Having assumed that the novel is a jazz text, I try, in chapter two, to examine the concept of polyphony in *Jazz*. Of course, there cannot be any true correspondence between musical and literary polyphony (or counterpoint). If the simultaneous presentation of distinctive musical voices or melodies is possible, it is not the case in literature. In literature, therefore, this notion of counterpoint must be adapted: it would rather, as Mikhail Bakhtin suggests in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*<sup>1</sup> refer to the presence of distinctive and independent voices that express themselves in the novel and that are all equally valid.

Another recurring notion is the oral/aural dimension in *Jazz*. In a novel, which is meant to be read, why insist upon its oral character? Firstly, the language which is used by the narrator and the characters has the characteristics of a spoken language, and one must also keep in mind that the narrator is supposedly *telling* the story, not *writing* it. Secondly, Morrison grants a lot of importance to the sounds and rhythms of the English language and suggests that this language is meant to be heard. Morrison's obvious desire to go back to some form of orality in literature is linked to her attempt at introducing African American cultural elements into a traditional western white medium, the novel.

The first chapter concentrates on several poems by Langston Hughes, which, to my sense, clearly exemplify the adaptation of blues and jazz elements into literature, and poetry in particular. Most of the thematic and formal elements which this chapter brings out are applied to the analysis of *Jazz* in the other chapters. The second chapter concentrates on

---

<sup>1</sup> Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota, 1984).

Morrison's novel at the level of the form and examines the notion of polyphony to see whether the novel presents truly different and independent voices or if these 'voices' all derive from and depend upon the main I-narrator. This finally leads me to reflect on the 'liberation of the voice' in subordinate, minority literatures, and especially African American literature, and on the kind of strategies such a literature can use to make its voice be heard.

My third and last chapter focuses on Morrison's methods in dealing with the traumatic aspects of African American history which have been erased or biased in many White American mainstream novels. In Morrison's conception, this rewriting of the past leads to a fictional re-enactment of traumatic experiences which triggers a process of (self-)healing and self-definition. Finally, the conclusion compares Morrison's political program as she defines it, partly, in her Nobel Lecture to what she achieves in the novel *Jazz*.