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Fiction plurilingue and Monolingual Criticism

ARTICLE

What language should I write this essay in? Or: In which language should I write it? *Dans quelle langue ? In quale lingua ?* Not being a migrant, not having grown up in a multilingual community, and not being a very gifted linguist, though having done my best at school and university, there are only three that I might choose; of these, English is the obvious one for me – it is my everyday tongue, the medium in which my thoughts most readily find articulation. But which English? Knowing that language well, I know that I do not really know it, for it is many languages, varying according to nation and region (Indian, American, Yorkshire), to genre (literary academic, medical, legal), to class, to style, each blurring into the next, just as this congeries of languages called English (many of which I cannot speak, though I am said to be a speaker of ‘English’) blurs into the congeries of languages called by other names, for instance French. So, to choose to write in English is inevitably to choose to write in a kind of English; and the obvious kind, these days, is what is developing into a Standard International Academic English, the idiom of ever more colloquia and journals. Yet, in a session at the conference on ‘Nouveaux mondes, nouveaux romans?’^[1], Françoise Lavocat lamented the growing necessity for all academics, whatever their home language, to write in this professionalised tongue. In it, she said, ‘*je n’ai plus mon style*’; and many users of language, including everyday speakers of ‘English’, might well feel the same. So I am going to try to write, not in a generalised international acadamese, but in a style which recognises the circumstances of its production: my own circumstances as someone employed by a faculty of ‘English Language and Literature’ in Oxford, though one whose research is in the areas of ‘English and Comparative Literature’ or ‘English and Translation Studies’, as well as the structures that are hosting me: the Centre d’Etudes du Roman et du Romanesque (CERCLL), and the SFLGC website. I want to allow my English to feel the pressure of the French that I am choosing not to try to write: to recognise, for instance, that *roman* and *romanesque* are ways of organising the literary field which do not carry over into English, where ‘Romanesque’ is only a style of architecture, and where ‘romance’ and ‘novel’ are typically defined in opposition to one another; while also recognising that when I write the word *fiction* you cannot tell (and perhaps I cannot either) which language I am using.

I have been prompted to draw attention to the possible languages of criticism by the new attention that has been given, in recent years, to the multiple languages of literature. Literature has always been multilingual, of course; but in the new global, planetary, world, or world-like literary field that academics, publishers and the internet are bringing into being, multilingual literature, and the multilingualism of literature, are becoming newly prominent. No doubt the particularities of that prominence vary from place to place; but the same structures that nourish multilingualism mean that awareness of it crosses languages too, so that (for example) I learn of the multilingual practice of Yoko Tawada, the Japanese-German writer, via the trans-lingual practice of American and Canadian translators and publishers. This is part of what is *nouveau*

about the new *nouveaux romans* addressed by this publication.

But what about our language practice as literary critics ? Our way with words ? Should this new visibility of the many languages of literature provoke new attention to the languages of our own critical discourse, or discourses ? One powerful strand of recent scholarship turns away from language to focus on forms, both of narrative and of circulation: the phenomenon of world literature requires the whole world of literature to be scanned via 'distant reading' ^[2] . But should there also be, could there also be, a new mode of critique plurilingue to match the plurilingualism of literature? Do the new new novels require a nouvelle nouvelle critique? If so, what might it be like?

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NOTES

[1]

Round table on "Comparatims and globalization", XLth SFLGC Congress, 11.27.2015.

[2]

Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading*, London, Verso, 2013.



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