



Jacqueline Dutton
University of Melbourne

REVIEW ESSAY: MEMOIRS FROM BEYOND LANGUAGE

Review Essay: *Mémoires d'outre-langue:*

L'écriture translingue de soi

by Alain Ausoni

Slatkine Erudition, 2018. 198 pages.

“Memoirs from Beyond Language” is the translated title of Alain Ausoni’s beautifully written and erudite text. It is an allusion to François-René Chateaubriand’s posthumously published mid-19th century autobiographical work, *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* [Memoirs from Beyond the Grave], which resonates both aesthetically and intellectually with the contents of Ausoni’s book. The poetic turn of the title expresses the otherness or distance inspired by writing in a language that is not one’s own while referencing Chateaubriand’s innovations in autobiography. The subtitle emphasises the intimacy and originality of the subject matter: translingual writing (of) the self. As the text unfolds, it draws an arc that begins with a personal portrait of the author in the preface – his everyday experience of plurilingualism on Swiss food labels, and teaching French as a Foreign Language (FLE) – following through to a densely researched introduction and six chapters dedicated to remarkable translingual writers – and ending with a paradoxically coda-like “Ouverture” [Opening], which returns to the personal, but this time the personal as seen through the prism of the other writers studied in this volume.

The shape of the book is logical as well as pleasing. In a forty-page introduction, the author demonstrates his depth and breadth of knowledge, bringing in artistic examples such as Marc Chagall’s *Paris par la fenêtre* (1913) [Paris through the Window], which is the only colour plaque in the text (9) and stunning quotations from translingual writers working in French, like Luba

Jurgenson's "Mon français n'a pas d'enfance" (12) [My French has no childhood]. Ausoni oscillates between creative and critical examples, reviewing translingual tendencies through the centuries, ranging from Antoine de Rivarol's 1784 *Discours sur l'universalité de la langue française* [Discourse on the Universality of the French Language] to Jacques Derrida's deconstruction of language as property and the impossibility to appropriate language, to Steven G. Kellman's refining of the terminology. Debates arising from the *littérature-monde en français* [world-literature in French] manifesto are outlined, and the three major monographs that have appeared since 2000, each bringing together a coherent corpus of translingual French writers, are evaluated for their significant contributions to defining a field. Many of these critical works do not use "translingual" to refer to their corpus, but Ausoni, like myself, prefers this epithet because it can refer to authors, their work, their situations, and has the advantage of signifying a passage between languages that is not necessarily definitive (28).

The second part of the introduction justifies the author's focus on autobiographical translingual writing in French, following Philippe Lejeune's broad definitions of autobiography and arguing for "écriture de soi" as representative of the relative generic heterogeneity of the texts that he analyses in this book. Ausoni elicits significant tropes in translingual self-writing: the inaccessible horizon of childhood which requires remembering and translating something that happened in a different language (36); the betrayal and tension between confronting the past and naming the world anew (39); the unavoidable demands to tell the story of how the writer came to be writing in French (40). There are insights that stem from the author's background in FLE, but there is very little either in the introduction or the rest of the work that addresses the nexus of postcolonialism and translingualism.

In the six chapters that follow, Ausoni proposes a "cartography" of translingual literature, examining autobiographical texts in French published between 1989 and 2014, organised into three parts: Conversions, Liberations and Robinsons. Andreï Makine and Hector Bianciotti are the two examples of authors who "convert", making the life-changing shift to writing in French from their native Russian and Argentinian Spanish / Piedmontese respectively. Ausoni interprets their decisions in quasi-religious terms, suggesting that French is an "aubaine", a godsend, for these authors, and supports his argument with precise and powerful references from their self-writing and interviews. Subtly differentiating the two writers, Ausoni describes Makine as "transplanted" using a vegetal metaphor to compare the Russian author and his *Testament français* (1995) [French Testament] with a plant that thrives in more fertile soil, whereas Bianciotti is "converted", born again in French, writing *Ce que la nuit raconte au jour* (1992) [What the Night Tells the Day] with more intimacy than displayed in his previously published works in Spanish. Both writers are held up as model Francophiles from faraway places, proof that French forces of attraction can elevate those who choose this language for their literature to inhabit the lofty ranks of the *Académie*

française, as the chosen ones in a kind of reciprocal adoption. The chapter on Makine contains significantly deeper analysis and a wealth of comparisons to other translingual writers including Henri Troyat, Romain Gary, Elias Canetti, and others, and Ausoni's pithy conclusions contribute to scholarship on this writer:

Le Testament français dans son entier peut ainsi se lire comme le récit du destin d'un écrivain qui, entrant dans une littérature étrangère, et contrairement au *topos* d'une perte de la traduction, s'est *trouvé* dans le changement de langue. (71)

[*The French Testament* as a whole can thus be read as the story of a writer's destiny, who by entering into a foreign literature and contradicting the lost in translation *topos*, actually *found* himself in the change of language.]

The study of Bianciotti is less detailed though still compelling in its juxtaposition with Makine.

Liberations described in the second section of the book are those of Greek writer Vassilis Alexakis and Canadian author Nancy Huston. Ausoni distinguishes them from the previous writers by carefully establishing their diverse relationships with the French language achieved through translingual self-writing. Makine and Bianciotti cherish the *attaches* or moorings that French offers, while Alexakis and Huston are set free by French. Alexakis' urgency to take hold of his new language for journalism studies then autobiographical writing in *Paris-Athènes* (1989) and *La Langue maternelle* (1995) [Mother Tongue] is perfectly rendered in Ausoni's analysis of the Greek writer's translingual journey. Writing in Greek is tender but shadowed by the culpability of publishing in Greek journals associated with the Colonels' regime. Writing in French is a liberating self-translation, allowing Alexakis to escape – paradoxically – from the real. Huston stands out in contrast as the cerebral creature who finds her way into literature through critical writings on translingual authors like Romain Gary and Samuel Beckett under the supervision of Roland Barthes. As Ausoni notes with perspicacity, for Huston “le translinguisme a fait figure d'école de littérature” (126) [translingualism figured as her literary education]. After the controversies related to her self-translation from the English of *Cantique des plaines* (1993) [Song of the Plains] winning the Canadian Governor General's Prize, *Nord perdu* (1999) [Losing North: Musings on Land, Tongue and Self] explored the less-publicized dilemmas of writing in French and English as well as translating between the two. Again, Ausoni crystallises the conceptual in a most poetic fashion: “Dans *Nord perdu*, l'écriture de soi cherche et se sait chercher” (136) [In *Losing North*, self-writing is seeking and self-consciously searching].

The intriguingly titled third section – Robinsons – is clearly the most innovative part of this book. Unlike the love of all things French that characterises Makine's and Bianciotti's translingualism, or the breath of fresh air that Alexakis and Huston find in the French language, the two female Hungarian writers studied here – Agota Kristof and Katalin Molnar – manifest the radical

foreignness of writing in French, and the alienation and loss of familiar subjectivity it implies. Less celebrated, less well-known, these authors are out on their own, castaways like Robinson on an island where all reference points have gone. Kristof is particularly decentred, writing *L'Analphabète* (2004) [The Illiterate] from a French-speaking Swiss canton, in which she improvises on the French idiom “Partir, c’est mourir un peu” [To leave is to die a little]: “Partir, c’est mourir beaucoup” [To leave is to die a lot]. Ausoni portrays French as the “enemy language” for Kristof, a language by chance, just because she happened to be exiled in Francophone Switzerland, but valorises this (un)lucky encounter: “Peut-être l’époque a-t-il besoin de bardes translingues qui chantent autre chose que l’attrait d’une terre ou d’une langue promises” (161) [Maybe in these times we need translingual bards who sing something other than the appeal of the promised land or language]. Molnar’s original prose has been profiled by Pascale Casanova in *The World Republic of Letters* alongside Beckett and Joyce, demonstrating her embrace of “incorrect” spelling, grammar, tone, transcription, inflected by Hungarian morphosyntactics and her own special phonographics. *Quant à je (Kantaje)* (1996) [In I Opinion] plays with all of the above in a remarkably premonitive way – forecasting the phonetic stylistics of contemporary SMS messages. Ausoni emphasises the “disconcerting” nature, and “monstrosity” of this style of writing for those French readers who are imbued with correcting linguistic faults, highlighting Molnar’s fabulous image of the correctors using different coloured pens, to render the text a rainbow (177). More than any of Ausoni’s other examples, Molnar demonstrates that the preponderance of a monolingual French imaginary can no longer hold in a translingual world of letters (175). It is also clear that the arc of his text stretches from the centre to the periphery, from the consecrated writers fully adopted by the French to the more marginal figures who resist and revolutionise through writing in French.

The final few pages complete this decentring by introducing a little-known Czech author, Václav Jamek, who offers the perfect formula to close the text. In the first pages of his *Traité des courtes merveilles* (1989) [Treaty of short miracles], he writes that Czech is his mother tongue, French is his personal tongue. His articulation of linguistic distinction encapsulates Ausoni’s overall thesis regarding the individual and diverse meanings and methods that French provides these translingual writers. And it returns the book to the place where it started, the importance of the personal in relating language to creativity, expression, and “écriture de soi”.