



On reflection

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A musing on the experience of living in a foreign language in a country that is not one's own. The play of possession of, and dispossession by, the other tongue imagined as a reflexivity of illumination and obscurity: each language casts its changing shadow on the other, and is shadowed by the other as if by an irksome dopplegänger.

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It is increasingly the case that the language we speak is being refashioned by far-flung inflections. English is the language we all share here. And yet the assumption of a singular language through which we 'communicate' is disturbed by our experience of a polyphony of tongues issuing from bodies shaped by other sounds. My body was not formed by the English language. I am reminded of this fact every time I open my mouth. I was taught to place the tip of my tongue between my teeth to pronounce the 'th' of 'there'. I was taught to push the air to the front of the palate, and no further, to sound the 'h' of 'here'. I have learned a language by dint of grimaces which haunt my every utterance. I got my tongue around most of it but not all of it. The inaccurate placement of the emphasis on a syllable, the contraction of a vowel that should linger, elicit a smile, or a look of incomprehension. Having to repeat for the sake of being understood, I become conscious of the stuff this language is made of as words rasp and get stuck.

I spoke of English as the language we all share here. And yet the English we speak does not so much evince the abstraction of a common language as makes manifest individual acts of its production as always already modulated by sounds and syntaxes from elsewhere. The English we speak as foreigners, this adopted language, is full of folds within the shadow of which native tongues are lodged.

Wrapping one's tongue around strange words is in turn painful and pleasurable. It is the pleasure of she who believes she has vanquished recalcitrant difference. (Tracing foreign words on paper comes with greater ease – that is if acquired and native language share a script. And even if this were not the case, today our fingers no longer need to remember the shape of letters as the terse tap of a key increasingly replaces the various choreographies of hand writings).

When Alice Kaplan sets out to learn French, out of her native Minnesota and the familiar if inscrutable sounds of Yiddish and Hebrew breaking into everyday exchanges in American English, she goes at it with sensual fervour. As a student on her Junior year abroad in the South of France, she sleeps with the promiscuous André: 'What I really wanted from André was language [...]' she writes, 'What I wanted more than anything,

more than André even, was to make those sounds, which were the true sounds of being French. [...] I wanted to crawl into his skin, live in his body, be him. The words he used to talk to me, I wanted to use back. I wanted them to be my words.' And when she 'loses her words in French', she imagines 'a most fundamental communication' in love making, where 'thoughts are no longer thoughts [but] images, visions [...] a leg, a sex, a nose. Seen, felt, tasted.' But André corrects the spelling mistakes in the love letters she writes to him and will eventually seek the greater comfort of a French bedfellow. 'She had something I could not have, her blood and her tongue and a name with accents in it.' Now a Professor of French Kaplan writes to André and he writes back. 'There were a few spelling mistakes in his letter to me, the kind I'm hired to correct. But I didn't feel gleeful about his spelling, because it hadn't been spelling I had wanted from him. I wanted to breathe in French with André, I wanted to sweat French sweat. It was the rhythm and pulse of his French I wanted, the body of it, and he refused me, he told me I could never get that. I had to get it another way.'

In Kaplan's account of her youthful acquisition of the French language, it is her body that seems to be doing the learning as it 'feels' and 'tastes' that other body whose words, sounds and intonations she wants to absorb and be absorbed by. It is as if, in love making, there is invoked a maternal body of a time before language; a body that is in turn available, consumable even (in its provision of nourishment), and yet distant and obscure in its unconscious desires that trace enigmatic signifiers upon the body of the child. It is as if in this second language her sensual self intuits the possibility of a second birth into language, haunted by that original one, but André told her she 'could never get that'.

Novelist Eva Almassy begins her essay on 'Writing in an adopted language' with two tales of origin — her own, born in Budapest which she left at the age of 22, a political refugee, to come to Paris and a language she barely knew; and the tale of the [...]

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In exile in Berlin, Nabokov wrote: 'Compared to the shadows, light is a void.'

Throughout the Paris metro travellers are assailed by publicity for the Wall Street English Institute (one of the world's largest English language school). The dynamic young people in these images may represent the mobile subject of global capitalism who has exchanged his mother tongue for the international language of business.



Heinz Wissman uses the expression 'langue de service' to characterise a language subordinate to the aims and values of business, a language purged of ambiguities, reduced to the function of a *code* that can accommodate neither questioning nor dissent. We welcome the reduction of the riches of language when it comes to communication between airline pilots and air traffic controllers. But we may be less happy with the colonisation of all areas of cultural and intellectual life by an economic managerial discourse – a global linguistic monoculture without history or place, divested of affect, that implies a world without depth peopled by synchronised consciousnesses perpetually alert to the buzz of the market place.



Ludwig Wittgenstein famously observed: 'The limits of my language are the limits of my world'. The global ambition of Wall Street English is to subordinate many worlds to one language, a project that must suppress the fact that any one language contains many worlds. Here at the RCA, as in most other educational institutions, English is our common language. What we share, however, is less a common language than a common condition – the condition of living in a language not our own. We may speak in one language but we think *between languages*. Against the totalising and potentially totalitarian fiction of a common language – a language more than ever vulnerable to a Wall Street takeover – we may acknowledge the inevitability of our linguistic heterogeneity, a complex of idiolects opening onto other histories, other places, other imaginaries, other desires.

Francette Pacteau, November 2012