TOWARD A “WORLD LITERATURE” IN FRENCH

Trans. Daniel Simon

In due course, it will perhaps be said that this was a historic moment: in autumn 2006, five of the seven French literary prizes—the Goncourt, the Grand Prize for Novels of the Académie Française, the Renaudot, the Femina, and the Goncourt for High School Students—were awarded to foreign-born writers. A random coincidence, among publishers’ fall catalogs, uniquely concentrating talent from the “peripheries,” a random detour before the channel returns to the riverbed? A Copernican revolution, rather, in our opinion. Copernican because it reveals what the literary milieu already knew without admitting it: the center, from which supposedly radiated a franco-French literature, is no longer the center. Until now, the center, albeit less and less frequently, had this absorptive capacity that forced authors who came from elsewhere to rid themselves of their foreign trappings before melting in the crucible of the French language and its national history: the center, these fall prizes tell us, is henceforth everywhere, at the four corners of the world. The result? The end of “francophone” literature—and the birth of a world literature in French.

The world is returning—and it’s the best of news. Wasn’t the world always conspicuous by its absence in French literature? The world, the subject, meaning, history, the “referent”: for decades, these have been bracketed off by the masterminds, inventors of a literature with no other object than itself, creating, as it was called at the time, “its own critique in the very movement of its enunciation.” The novel was too serious an affair to be left to the novelists alone, who were guilty of a “naïve use of language” and encouraged to repeat themselves in complaisant linguistic exercises. While these texts went along merely referring to other texts in a game of endless combinations, there came a
time when the author found himself—and with it the very idea of creation—
effectively emptied out in order to make room for the commentators, the
exeges. Rather than rub up against the world in order to capture its essence
and vital energies, the novel, in the end, could merely watch itself being
written.

That writers were able to survive in such an intellectual atmosphere inspires
in us an optimism about the novel’s capacity to resist everything that would
conspire to negate or subjugate it.

This renewed desire to rejoin the world’s routes, this return to literature’s
powers of incandescence, this felt urgency of a “world literature,” has a unique
historical origin: namely, the return on the world scene... of the subject,
meaning, History, concomitant with the staggering blows that brought about the
dissolution of the grand ideologies—that is, from the effervescence of anti-
totalitarian movements, in the West as well as the East, that would eventually
tear down the Berlin Wall.

This return, one must realize, came about on the intersecting routes of
random paths—even as such a path was resisted with extreme force! As if, with
their chains cast off, each person had to learn how to walk again. With the
desire, first of all, to savor the dust from the roads, the allure of the outdoors,
the encounter of a stranger’s glance. The tales of these astonishing voyagers,
who appeared in the mid-1970s, would turn out to be the world’s sumptuous
entryways into fiction. Some, concerned with describing the world where they
lived—like Raymond Chandler or Dashiell Hammett once described the
American city—turned, in the wake of Jean-Patrick Manchette, toward fictional
noir. Others, meanwhile, turned to a pastiche of crime fiction or the novel of
adventure, skillful or prudent ways in which to recapture narrative, all the while
flirting with the “novel of the forbidden.” Still others, storytellers, staked their
claim in comics, in the company of Hugo Pratt, Moebius, and a few others. And
“Francophone” literatures were receiving renewed attention, particularly in the
Caribbean, as if, far away from vitiated French models, a novelistic and poetic
effervescence—inherited from Saint-John Perse and Aimé Césaire—was being
affirmed there. And this in spite of the blinders on a literary milieu that
professed to be waiting for merely a few new pigments, ancient or creole words
(so picturesque, indeed), ready to refresh a gruel that had become exceedingly
thin. The years 1976–77: the diverted paths of a return to fiction.

At the same time, a new wind was picking up from across the Channel,
imposing evidence of a new English-language literature, uniquely harmonized
with a world in the process of being born. In an England given over to its third
generation of Woolfian novels—that is to say, in the air that was barely palpable
which circulated around them—a handful of young dissenters were turning
toward the vast world, in order to breathe it in more deeply. Bruce Chatwin
departed for Patagonia, and his narrative took on the allure of a manifesto for a
generation of travel writers (“I apply to reality narrative techniques of the novel,
to restore the novelistic dimension of reality’). Next came clamoring, in an impressive hubbub, a series of noisy, versicolored, métis novels that proclaimed, with a rare force and new vocabulary, the din of these exponential foreign cities where the cultures of all the continents collided, reshuffled, and mingled with one another. At the heart of this effervescence were Kazuo Ishiguro, Ben Okri, Hanif Kureishi, Michael Ondaatje—and Salman Rushdie, who explored with acuity the upsurge of what he called “translated men”: those who, born in England, no longer lived in the nostalgia of a homeland forever lost but, finding themselves between two worlds, astride a chasm, valiantly attempted to draft a new world out of this telescoping condition. For the first time, then, a generation of emigrant writers, instead of melting into their adopted culture, set out to create by drawing on the source of their plural identity, in the ambiguous and shifting territory in which they rubbed up against each other. In this regard, Carlos Fuentes insisted, they were less the products of decolonization than the heralds of the twenty-first century.

How many writers in the French language, themselves caught between two or more cultures, mulled this strange disparity that relegated them to the margins, themselves “Francophones,” an exotic hybrid barely tolerated, while the children of the former British empire were, with complete legitimacy, taking possession of English letters? For the inheritors of the French colonial empire, perhaps they possessed some sort of congenital flaw in comparison to writers of the British empire? Or shouldn’t we recognize, rather, that the problem existed in the literary milieu itself, in its strange *ars poetica* turning like a whirling dervish upon itself, and in this vision of a francophone world upon which a maternal France, “patron of the arts, arms, and laws,” continued to dispense its radiance, like a universal benefactor eager to bring civilization to people living in the shadows? Those writers from the Antilles, Haiti, Africa who had confidence in their project had no reason to envy their counterparts in the English language. The concept of “creolization” that united them then, and by which they affirmed their singularity, was nothing less than a language in search of an autonomous self—one had to have been deaf and blind, only searching for an echo of oneself in others, not to understand it as such.

Let’s be clear: the emergence of a consciously affirmed, transnational world literature in the French language, open to the world, signs the death certificate of so-called Francophone literature. No one speaks or writes “Francophone.” Francophone literature is a light from a dying star. How could the world be concerned with the language of a virtual country? Yet it was the world that invited itself to the fall prize banquets, and we now understand that it was time for a revolution.

It might have come about earlier, this revolution. How was it possible to ignore for decades a Nicolas Bouvier and his aptly named *L’Usage du monde* (1985; Eng. *The Way of the World*, 1992)? Because at that time, the world was forbidden to dwell there. How was it possible not to recognize in
Réjean Ducharme one of our greatest contemporary authors, whose *L’hiver de force* (1973; Eng. *Wild to Mild*, 1980), carried along by an extraordinary poetic inspiration, came to overshadow everything that has since been written on the society of consumption and libertarian foolishness? Because the “Picturesque Provinces” were so highly regarded back then, of which a charming accent was all that was expected, with words that evoked the fragrance of archaic France. And one could pick and choose among African or Antillean writers, similarly marginalized: Why be surprised when the concept of creolization found itself reduced to its opposite, mistaken for a United Colors of Benetton slogan? Why be surprised if some stubbornly clung to an exclusive flesh-and-blood connection between nation and language that expressed a singular genius—since in a strict sense the “francophone” concept presents itself as the last avatar of colonialism? What these fall prizes confirm is the inverse notion: that the colonial pact is broken, that language thus liberated has become everyone’s concern, and that, if one firmly subscribes to it, the era of contempt and adequacy has ended. The end, then, of “francophone” literature, and the birth of a world literature in French: such are the stakes, to the extent that these writers accept them.

“World literature” because literatures in French around the world today are demonstrably multiple, diverse, forming a vast ensemble, the ramifications of which link together several continents. But “world literature” also because all around us these literatures depict the world that is emerging in front of us, and by doing so recover, after several decades, from what was “forbidden in fiction” what has always been the province of artists, novelists, creators: the task of giving a voice and a visage to the global unknown—and to the unknown in us. In the end, if we perceive everywhere this creative effervescence, it’s because something in France itself has recommenced, in which the young generation, having shed itself of the era of suspicion, seizes without hesitation the ingredients of fiction in order to open up new novelistic paths—to the extent that it looks to us like we’re in the midst of a renaissance, a dialogue in a vast polyphonic ensemble, without concern for any battle for or against the preeminence of one language over the other or any sort of “cultural imperialism” whatsoever. With the center placed on an equal plane with other centers, we’re witnessing the birth of a new constellation, in which language freed from its exclusive pact with the nation, free from every other power hereafter but the powers of poetry and the imaginary, will have no other frontiers but those of the spirit.

*Paris*

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