LIT ERAR Y CRIT ICSM

Moment français
On Modernism's love of the French style

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Gilles Philippe

FRENCH STYLE
L'accent français de la prose anglaise
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Marcel Proust, 1897, by Jacques-Émille Blanche

It was a commonplace in late nineteenth-century intellectual circles on both sides of the Channel that the French had "style"—that French writers could write in a way that could not, or not with the same qualities of clarity, verve and "finish". French (the language) was believed to be intrinsically better suited, grammatically and syntactically, to the production of stylish sentances, so French prose writers began with an advantage—an advantage increased, on the one hand by their respect for rules, principles and models of correct style, and on the other by the French disregard of such things. Not surprisingly, British writers who paid any attention to "style" were deemed to have got this strange preoccupation from France; reciprocally (though there were far fewer of these), French stylistic eccentricities were tagged as "anglaisé". Henry James (who counts as an "Écrivain anglais" for this purpose) exemplifies the writer allegedly formed by the study of Hippolyte Taine and Gustave Flaubert; Marcel Proust was identified by one of the first reviewers of Du côté de chez Swann as (in Philippe's words) "une sorte de romantique anglais". Philippe devotes a chapter to each; he recounts the history of the clichés that dominated this particular discursive field, both literary ("Le style, c'est là France même") and cultural-nationalist ("La France, c'est le style même"); and traces the process by which ideas about French style reached and were circulated in Britain (including a chapter on the Critérium under T. S. Eliot's editorship). Quite a lot of this history is not only interesting and informative, but extremely funny—though the comedy sometimes, as in Kipling's story, has a sharp edge. Philippe's most valuable insight is the distinction he proposes between "influence" and "référence" as a way of thinking about relations between writers, languages and systems of ideas. Influence is a notoriously slippery concept, whereas "référence", which relies more on analogy and juxtaposition, would resemble, so he argues, a means of describing the sense that writers had of each other's work, and as a method of critical comparison. To write about Henry James with reference to Flaubert is not the same as writing about the influence of Flaubert on James, and Philippe makes the most of this methodological difference.

It is particularly important for him because he is primarily concerned that, when you get right down to it, it is almost impossible to prove the direct grammatical and syntactical influence of French on any writer; there has been one influential and very smart Conrad, who claimed to compose his sentences in French in his head, and then translate them into English on the page. Philippe's mastery of technical linguistic detail serves him well here, as he shows the opacity of general formulas such as "style indirect libre" or "impressionnisme" or "impersonnalité", often applied anachronistically and without regard for context, and, contrastingly, the value of looking at actual features of the two languages—verb tenses, pronouns, word order—to determine whether or not an English writer's "style" can be said to have absorbed "la leçon françoise". There are lengthy, but deeply absorbing passages of close reading of Flaubert, Zola, James, Woolf, Proust and others, and Philippe's guidance is responsive to the intricate and sometimes contradictory nature of the evidence. What these close readings suggest, in Philippe's view, is that Modernism's "moment français" was not the product of specific linguistic influences. British admirers of Flaubert don't really write like Flaubert, and their praxis directly contradicts his principles. The linguistic barrier prevents direct contact of this kind. Instead, Philippe emphasizes the importance of "l'imaginaire", a collective intuition of "Frenchness", which was entertained by both British and French writers, though for different reasons. It suited British writers who wanted to "make it new" to use the prestige, or fashionableness, of French culture as a weapon against British Philistinism, and it suited their critics to label them as "Frenchified" for doing so. In France, linguistic and cultural superiority was taken for granted— as Philippe mischievously points out, there were no calls for French writers to imitate the style anglaise, since everyone agreed there was no such thing. The quest for linguistic influence resembles The Hunting of the Snark; in which the map turns out to be "a perfect and absolute blank", and in which your quarry will, inevitably, "softly and silently vanish away". It is the motivation that drives the quest, the interplay of the different characters and the savour of their speech, that make it worth studying.

Philippe is well-read in the primary and secondary literature, his own translations from English are accomplished, and he makes few mistakes in an area where you might forgive many more. I decided to end this review with his translation of the word "shudder" on page 106, but Céle Töths shouldn't appear as "Tóthni", as he does both as "Céle" and also as "Zóthni", and in his essay, if he is also complimented for his "beau roman" The Master). Unfortunately, although Philippe writes with—well, with style, let us say—he is too fond of his own turns of phrase, too apt to glance in the mirror and nod approval, and he gives grounds for confirming one of the oldest of John Bull's stereotypes of the French, their vanity. Je ne suis qu'un auteur, but Philippe is continually, flagrantly, and in the end exasperatingly, wrong. As yet, so far as I can see, there is no evidence of his own fifteen times in his footnotes, far more than any other critic, and the fact that he excludes himself from the index seems less an act of modesty than of vanity. It is nearly spoilt a very good book— for this hypo- critic lecture, at least.