

Moment français

On Modernism's love of the French style

DANIEL KARLIN

Gilles Philippe

FRENCH STYLE

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

In Rudyard Kipling's story "The Bonds of Discipline", the narrator comes across a booklet written by "M. de C.", a French naval spy who stowed away on a British warship, disguised as a Portuguese labourer, and who relates his surprising discoveries about "the morale, at the present day, of the British sailorman". "I read it with care," the narrator tells us, "from the adorably finished prologue – it is the disgrace of our Navy that we cannot produce a commissioned officer capable of writing one page of lyric prose – to the eloquent, the joyful, the impassioned end". Needless to say, things are not quite what they seem. As the narrator discovers, "M. de C." has been fooled to the top of his bent, the crew of the *Archimandrite* having put on an improvised, but controlled performance of folly, incompetence and near-mutiny, ending with the execution on deck (by firing squad) of a Marine who has defied the drunken Captain. "M. de C." leaves the ship convinced he has witnessed the British Navy in the last stages of weakness and degradation. As the tale spreads around Portsmouth docks, the *Archimandrite* has been given a new nickname, and is now universally known as the *Bedlamite*.

Kipling's story, as the title suggests, is about "the bonds of discipline" – and the limits to which they can be stretched. The Captain believes that the *Archimandrite* is "a ship you can trust" – meaning that he can allow his crew to indulge in a carnival of disorder, disobedience, ineptitude, overturning of hierarchy, in the confidence that, once the carnival is over, everything will return to "normal", and the morale of the British sailorman will be eloquently and joyfully re-affirmed. He is right – but only just. The story dances on the edge of that fine distinction between make-believe and the real thing – between pretending to subvert the institution that holds you in its "bonds", and actually doing it. But that is not all. Kipling the writer was interested, also, in confecting "M. de C.'s" "lyric prose", and much of the story is taken up with a burlesque rendition of his Gallic phrases and syntax, and with further mock-laments at the "disgrace of our Navy" in being unable to match the literary gifts of the French. We will just have to be content with blowing them out of the water whenever called on to do so.

The story was first published in magazine form in 1903, at a time of Anglo-French diplomatic tension and mutual suspicion; only five years earlier, during the Fashoda Incident of 1898, in which Britain had forced the withdrawal of a French expeditionary force in the Sudan, it had seemed entirely possible that the two countries might go to war. The *entente cordiale* of 1904 partially resolved these tensions, and when the story appeared in volume form in that year, in the collection *Traffics and Discoveries*, Kipling found himself in the position of having mocked the gullibility (not to mention the lyric prose) of an ally, not a potential foe. But looked at in another light, that awkwardness is wholly apposite. There they stand, perfide Albion and Mongsewer Frog, smiling sweetly, and armed to the teeth.

Kipling read French fluently and spoke it passably, and, despite what might appear from "The Bonds of Discipline", he loved France with a passion – it is one of the rare blemishes in Gilles Philippe's otherwise impeccably knowledgeable book that he seriously underestimates Kipling's lifelong engagement with France, and the influence on him of French lan-

guage and literature. He first visited Paris as a teenager, in the company of his father John Lockwood Kipling who was in charge of the British India pavilion at the Exposition Universelle of 1878, and in *Souvenirs of France*, published over fifty years later, he remembered this trip and remarked, "It was through the eyes of France that I began to see." Or in French: "C'est à travers les yeux de la France que je commençais à voir".

And yet, Philippe – to whom this statement would be meat and drink, encapsulating a whole dimension of his subject – might point to a small problem in that translation, which renders "began to see" by "commençais à voir". English has no true equivalent to the imperfect tense in French, so that *I began* could not idiomatically have been written *I was beginning*, and could be translated as *je commençais*, or *je commençai*, or even *j'ai commencé*. It is a small, but persistent irritant, and Philippe shows in forensic detail how it vexes translations of French writers such as Flaubert and Zola, flattening distinctions and taking out essential flavours from that elusive, admired quality, "French style". His book is about the paradoxical English enthusiasm for this style, in the years between 1880 and 1930 – roughly the literary period we designate as "Modernism". It documents and illustrates a cultural "moment", a linguistic problem, a literary fascination; and, contemplating the threefold and fourfold ironies of its subject, it declares itself, finally, to be "l'histoire d'une illusion".

But then the word *histoire* can also mean *story*, as it used to in English, when authors could play on its double meaning (*The History of Tom Jones*, *The History of Henry Esmond*, even *The History of Mr Polly*) – so that this phrase, too, isn't straightforward. Is Philippe a historian or an unreliable tale-teller? I suspect he would see himself quite happily as both. After all he is dealing, primarily, with what he calls – it is one of his key terms – an "imaginaire", a set of myths, perceptions, prejudices, incalculably more potent than the "facts" on which they claim to be based. Like "M. de C.", Philippe witnesses an elaborate charade by both British and French writers, critics and linguists – but unlike Kipling's naive stowaway, he is not taken in.

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, and British writers 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 sentences, 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 the British 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 eccentrics were tagged as "anglicisés". 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 romancier 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 la 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 *Criterion* under T. S. Eliot's editorship). Quite a lot of this *histoire* 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 "l'influence" and "la 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, works well both as 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 differ-

ence. It is particularly important for him because one of his main contentions is 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 in English – even one like Joseph 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 "impressionism" or "impersonality", 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 française". 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 practice in some cases directly contradicts his principles. The linguistic barrier prevents direct contact of this kind. Instead, Philippe emphasizes the importance of "l'imaginaire", a collective fantasy 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 *le style anglais*, 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 both 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 certainly forgive him, or his printer, for inventing the portmanteau word "shudder" on page 106, but Colm Tóibín shouldn't appear as 'Tóinbin', as he does both on page 131 and in the index, even 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* may be *un autre*, but Philippe is continuously, flagrantly, and in the end exasperatingly, self-referring. (Literally so: he cites himself 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 prudence.) He very nearly spoils a very good book – for this *hypocrite lecteur*, at least.