the changing profession

Talking French

GERALD PRINCE

I AM NOT PARTICULARLY SENSITIVE TO SPACE AND LOCATION, EXCEPT WHEN IT COMES TO REAL ESTATE. STILL, I CANNOT HELP BUT NOTICE their increased importance in the human sciences: philosophers evoke heterotopies and dream of geophilosophy, historians explore *lieux de mémoire* ("sites of memory"), and distant reading or surface reading competes with close reading. It is as if to the end of history there corresponded a beginning of geography, and some scholars, like Michel Collot, have even spoken of a spatial turn (15).

In teaching and studying French literature, which I have been doing for a long time, geographic forces have always had a significant role, because of the distance between France and the United States and because of the global situation of the two countries. That the distance has become less daunting in the past fifty or sixty years has led to more scholarly exchanges, smoother collaborations, easier access to subjects or objects, and the study of the literary *extrême contemporain* ("extremely contemporary"), say, or that of modern popular literature is now less problematic. As for the global situation, there has been a French loss and an American gain of cultural power, with less United States attention paid to French cultural products. This relative disaffection permeates many texts. I remember quite well how Donald Morrison buried French culture (Morrison and Compagnon), and I will not forget that Mark Bittman even argued in the *New York Times* that one ate better in London than in Paris. Across the ocean too, there was concern. As early as the 1990s, Jean-Marie Domenach deplored the twilight of French civilization. A few years later, Nicolas Baverez described a falling France.

Along with this smaller role in the "new global village," various features of the American context—from potato liberation and humanities crises to demographic changes and populist suspicions—have had their part to play in the degraded United States image of France and, most pertinent here, in the reduced academic importance granted to French.[1] Undergraduates no longer find France sufficiently useful or glamorous. Individual literary products have more and more

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PMLA 131.5 (2016), published by the Modern Language Association of America

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2016.131.5.1489 Published online by Cambridge University Press

trouble making the cut, and graduate students, perhaps to compensate for a perceived lack of seriousness, favor overarching (ideological) excavations rather than plain monographic explorations. French theory itself, which exerted so much influence and added so much excitement to so many disciplines, has waned, though countless studies still include more than a grain of Barthes, a trace of Derrida, a pinch of Foucault; though Badiou, Rancière, Latour, and Glissant have been recruited; and though Bourdieu has become the sociologist on call. To a large extent, French theory has been supplanted by more homegrown activities, like gender interrogations, postcolonial inspections, and ecocritical inquiries.

Modern French fiction has not been spared either. If it still proves more attractive in classrooms than seventeenth-century French poetry, say, or eighteenth-century French prose, it certainly does not draw any crowds. Some of its biggest attractions—Proust, Sartre, Camus—are exploited by departments of English, political science, psychology, or geology, and its more recent manifestations have been supposedly crippled by formalism (the nouveau roman has become the new bête noire), solipsism, or nihilism, compared with the much vaunted strength and vibrancy of francophone fiction.

Yet surely the change in the drawing power of French fiction is not the result of a lessening in the quality of its products. Apart from the situation of French in the world and in the United States, literature in general and fiction in particular are not and cannot be quite what they were. Rival purveyors of entertainment, stimulation, or knowledge are more numerous than they have ever been and include the great or not so great works of other present and past traditions. Besides, the very idea of privileged fonts of culture has faded in the midst of postmodern equivalences. The responsibility of an enterprise like the nouveau roman, with its attachment to formal prospecting and its assumed indifference to the world, has been much exaggerated. The French new novel is remarkably diverse, it arguably gave birth to several masterpieces, and its writers regularly deal with worldly concerns: Claude Simon with war, history, psychological and physical debacles, for instance; Michel Butor with urban living, love, and death; and Robbe-Grillet himself with adultery, colonialism, and revolution.

In any case, however influential the nouveau roman may have been, it never made up more than a tiny percentage of French fictional production in the 1950s through the 1970s. In addition to best sellers and formulaic or paraliterary novels, one could find many works—by the likes of Paul Gadenne and Françoise Sagan, Antoine Blondin and Christiane Rochefort, Romain Gary or Émile Ajar—that were basically realistic and narratively conventional as well as highly literary, and even notable. Gary's *Les racines du ciel* was perhaps the first ecological novel and Ajar's *La vie devant soi* was probably the first one written entirely in solecistic French. Established writers like Julien Gracq, Albert Cohen, Jean Giono, and Raymond Queneau published a good number of valuable texts. New writers did too. Think of Patrick Modiano, who felt that the nouveau roman was "sans . . . vie" 'lifeless' (43) and said that "la littérature pour la littérature, les recherches sur l'écriture, tout ce byzantinisme pour chaires et colloques ne m'intéresse pas" 'literature for literature's sake, research about writing, all this Byzantinism for professors and colloquia does not interest me' (Ezine); or think of Michel Tournier, who stressed that he was on Zola's side rather than Joyce's (Bouloumié 254) and, echoing André Chénier, wrote, "Mon propos n'est pas d'innover dans la forme mais de faire passer dans une forme aussi traditionnelle, préservée et rassurante que possible une matière ne possédant aucune de ces qualités" 'My goal is not to innovate formally but to express in a form as traditional, safe, and reassuring as possible a content that has none of these qualities' (Tournier 195).

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2016.131.5.1489 Published online by Cambridge University Press

As early as the 1960s, in fact, the nouveau roman began to weaken, and neither the claims of the nouveau nouveau roman nor the extravagances of the "textual novel" or the *Tel Quel* novel were able to energize it. Its influence continues to be felt—for example, in the self-reflections and technical ruminations informing many contemporary texts, in the increasingly common use of the present tense and the *passé composé* (instead of the poor *passé simple*), and in the avoidance of dialogue. Writers as different as Patrick Deville, Camille Laurens, Michel Houellebecq, and Jean-Loup Trassard investigate fictional devices and interrogate fabulation. Other novelistic enterprises that can evoke the nouveau roman because of their mechanical dominant—Oulipian ones, for instance—continue to matter. Even Modiano, with his tortuous spaces, his hazy temporalities, his uncertain investigations, and Tournier, with his sinister writings and fugal constructs, are not always as far from the nouveau roman or as close to Zola as they say. After all, the literary novel has long been driven by a desire for discovery and invention. Still, however much interest French fiction of the past forty or fifty years has shown in itself and its forms, it has also displayed other dominants.

If it is not quite correct to say, as some have, that French novels have returned to the world and the subject (since they never really left them),[2] it is certainly true that they often pay a lot of attention to both. Maybe formalist ventures lost some of their edge after innumerable journeys to the end of the new. Maybe claims to go a bit further were themselves left behind. Maybe it is merely a result of the pendulum swing that takes place in the field of letters every few years. Maybe the so-called return is related to the old but stubborn idea that the novel is an instrument of knowledge and that, in accord with its penchant for studying itself and its basic elements (fictional space, narrative configuration, textual dynamics), it can be viewed as a (long) thought experiment. The novel may not be the equal of other art forms when it comes to immediacy, sensuality, or mimetic force, but it excels in presenting possible affective and cognitive states of affairs, their causes, and their consequences. Finally, perhaps the vitality of the francophone novel, like that of similarly "alternative" fiction, encouraged "Franco-French" writers to favor the inspection and imagining of reality. Not that these "alternative" fictions neglect the world of writing for the writing of the world: the examples of Édouard Glissant, Kateb Yacine, Assia Djebar, and Chloé Delaume are telling. But such writers, born in other circumstances, developing in other conditions, and having other horizons, often express other interests and more than suggest that too much focusing on matters of literariness and form can lead to depletion,[3] constitute an abdication, and doom the novel to abandonment, isolation, and neglect. In order to maintain or increase its relevance, the novel should be interested in more than itself. Novelists, even as they realize that the status of literature has changed and that they cannot always compete with the advances of the social sciences or the new media, can envisage and reveal not only their own possibilities—this is one of the sources of autofiction, of writing a novel about oneself—but also those of old phenomena and especially new ones (scientific theses, technological achievements, new perils, new conflicts, new perspectives).

An important subset of recent French fiction in fact is autofiction, as illustrated by Christine Angot, Guillaume Dustan, Serge Doubrovsky, and Catherine Millet. Like literary autobiography, autofiction often features technical fireworks, as if a writer's self-depiction and self-invention are not interesting in themselves unless the writer is famous or frequents famous people; but it also pays great attention to the narrating subject. Another important subset, which is related to autofiction, includes docunovels, fictionalized

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2016.131.5.1489 Published online by Cambridge University Press

essays, and a host of works in which factuality plays a major role: I am thinking of Pierre Michon's *Vie de Joseph Roulin*, Emmanuel Carrère's *L'adversaire*, Frédéric Beigbeder's *Windows on the World*, and Jean-Loup Trassard's *Dormance*. These are not simply realist works, dependent on plausibility and full of reality effects. Nor are they historical novels in which more or less distant real events and characters help constitute the plot; or romans à clef, with their gossiping and score settling; or romanticized histories, which liven up historical situations with sentimental intrigues and appealing incidents. Instead, these are works attempting to tell what was and may have been rather than what might have been, works in which real documents are used as documents rather than as props for a fictional story, works in which factual (extant, verifiable) elements are not in the service of fiction or narrative but are served and illumined by them. There are quite a few French antecedents for this kind of text, from Edmond de Goncourt's *Chérie* to the testimonial novels about World War I, World War II, and the concentration camps or to the surrealists and in particular André Breton, who denounced in *Nadja* "les empiriques du roman qui prétendent mettre en scène des personnages distincts d'eux-mêmes" 'the empiricists of the novel who claim to give us characters distinct from themselves' (17). Marguerite Yourcenar provides another example with *Mémoires d'Hadrien*, and perhaps Jean-Paul Sartre does too with his *roman vrai* ("novel that is true") on Flaubert: "je l'avoue, c'est une fable; rien ne prouve qu'il en fut ainsi" 'I admit it, it's a fable; nothing proves that it was the case' (139). Still, the recent flowering of the genre is both undeniable and remarkable, as if the border between fact and fiction was more problematic than ever and truth stranger and more interesting than fantasy.

If contemporary French fiction often focuses on worlds more than on words, many of its American consumers—French majors, graduate students, teachers, critics—seem to have the same inclination. Partly because of their shaky linguistic skills and because of the time it takes to acquire them (*plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*), French majors usually have less reading experience and literary capital than their English or comparative literature counterparts. They feel more comfortable with theme than with technique. They find ideas more tamable than expression and history more engaging than rhetoric (forget about grammar!). They confuse subject matter with substance and think it more relevant than style. More seasoned, focused, and savvy consumers inhabit and develop other situations. But they too frequently manifest the preference of world to word.

Today, in the American variety of French studies the only kind of public criticism that shows strength is academic. Fake or real amateur criticism, which today is mainly found online, in chat rooms, blogs, readers' comments, and the like, may be thriving and may be good, but it rarely deals with French literature. Writers' criticism, which is on the wane in the United States and in France (where are the Sontags and Updikes, the Thibaudets, Sartres, and Bartheses of yesteryear?), is moribund if not dead when it comes to contemporary French texts. I am sure that at least some American poets read at least some practicing French ones and that emulation is the rule among Oulipians of all nationalities, but I can think of no significant essay on recent French literary works by an American writer of any persuasion. Journalistic criticism shows a similar lack of enthusiasm. A quick search of the *New York Times* for 2010–14 focusing on living French writers yields telling results: Houellebecq, probably the most famous French living novelist, gets 31 mentions; Modiano, despite his Nobel prize, 18; Muriel Barbery, *L'élégance du hérisson* and its movie version notwithstanding, 18; and Marie NDiaye, winner of the 2009 Prix Goncourt, 11. A Nobel winner too, J. M. G. Le Clézio is mentioned 8 times

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2016.131.5.1489 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and Pascal Quignard twice, including once in Alain Corneau's obituary. Pierre Michon, the most celebrated French prose writer alive, scores one reference, like Fleury Michon, the iconic brand of charcuterie, and like Annie Ernaux. As for Alain Badiou, Jacques Rancière, and Julia Kristeva, the count is 11, 6, and 3, respectively. Compare these numbers with 565 mentions for Elizabeth Gilbert, 549 for Philip Roth, 151 for Gary Shteyngart, and at least 63 for Judith Butler. More pertinent, compare these numbers with the 1970–74 period, during which Sartre got mentioned in the *New York Times* 235 times, Barthes 170, Beauvoir 96, and Foucault 95.

Academic criticism of contemporary French texts, which frequently discusses not only Ernaux, Quignard, and Michon but a host of other writers as well, is a different matter, because despite all the declines, it still enjoys pretty good health. There were over 350 active participants at the 2014 colloquium on twentieth- and twenty-first-century French and francophone studies in New York City and, just as remarkably, about 300 at the 2015 colloquium in Baton Rouge. As in France, this criticism has to face both the ease and the difficulty of saying something new about new texts. It also has to cope with the fact that, more than ever before, texts situate themselves not so much in terms of the French tradition or of a contemporary (French) group or movement as in terms of textual constellations from different parts of the world. This criticism in the United States, unlike in France, is not a relatively new kind of enterprise: American academics have long examined authors who are not anywhere near dead. It may lack the advantage of developing in close proximity to these authors and their milieu, but it may benefit from being unconstrained by this proximity. Most significant, perhaps, it is less interested in the (formal) singularity of a text than in its (cultural) symptomizing or representativeness: the general theme of the colloquium in New York was money and that of the one in Baton Rouge literature and the production of knowledge.[4]

The attraction to the symptomatic or the emblematic has yielded numerous contributions to many different areas of study: literary takes on race, class, or gender; literary responses to scientific discoveries or mass media; literary depictions of animals, food, or space. The main topic of the 2016 twentieth- and twenty-first-century French and francophone studies colloquium in Saint Louis ("Passages, Thresholds, Gates") is related to literary geography. But if American academic critics have worked on space in modern French fiction and poetry, they have not spent much energy studying space in criticism. Nor have they explored (contemporary) criticism—or contemporary literature, for that matter—in space or examined the space of criticism or fashioned spatially adventurous criticism (variously perfumed, for example, or in four dimensions).[5] But whether or not they investigate these possibilities, the study of French will likely remain minor for some time to come, diminished like a musical interval, secondary like a logical premise, marginal like a location. Even if minor, however, let it be young, fresh, vigorous, and capable of surprising developments and achievements.

Notes

All translations are mine. It is a sign of the times that much of the text I quote here has not been published in an English translation.

1. That a number of departments of French have become departments of French language and literature, departments of French studies, and, last but by no means least, departments of French and francophone studies is suggestive.

2. On this return, see, among many other works, Asholt and Dambre.

3. Over fifty years ago, Jean-Bertrand Barrère bemoaned "the slimming diet of the novel."

4. There are notable exceptions, like Warren Motte, who practices a supple and capacious formalism. See, for instance, his *Fables of the Novel* and *Fiction Now*.

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2016.131.5.1489 Published online by Cambridge University Press

5. A similar situation obtains in my other field of study, narratology: narrative in space (I do not mean culture) has received much less attention than space in narrative. It is time for an expansive geographic narratology to be developed.

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https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2016.131.5.1489 Published online by Cambridge University Press