theories and methodologies

# Autoexoticriticism

MATTHEW REYNOLDS

THIS COLLECTION OF ESSAYS HAS THREADED SEVERAL LINES OF ARGUMENT THROUGH AND AROUND THE TOPIC OF AUTOEXOTICISM. WITH Minyan Sun we saw how an exoticizing gaze can develop the feedback loop of autoexoticism when the self recognizes its investment in the other and subjects itself to its own desiring attention. Daniele Nunziata and Naomi Charlotte Fukuzawa both traced further complexities of identity that cross the self-other boundary in colonial Cyprus and between Britain and Japan. Peter Hill, Kasia Szymanska, and Valentina Gosetti all explored the tactical potential of autoexotic elements in a politics of representation, in locations as diverse as Syria, Poland, and Flanders. With Adriana Jacobs we found autoexoticism in recent Hebrew poetry to be a "transcreative and relational" imaginative practice. Finally, Xiaofan Amy Li argued that autoexoticism opens "the boundaries of one's subjectivity and culture to change and rupture," creating "a holistic field of intercultural experience" where "what is considered self and other are transient and plastic," since they are drawn into an intercultural practice that "consciously selects and re-creates elements and aspects from disparate cultures and identities." As these accounts reveal, there can be much that is attractive in autoexoticist styles of being, of self-representation, and of encounter. They are formally and linguistically mobile. They have a strong affective charge, provoking reactions of amusement, embarrassment, or outrage. They are courageous, since they run the risk of being dismissed as mere exoticism. And they can loosen established identities, opening them to change.

But what about our own writing practices as scholars when we endeavor to represent these strategies of representation, to encounter these modes of encounter? Our work too involves opening the boundaries of our identities (at least, we hope it does). We too are engaged in a relational, intercultural practice that draws disparate elements together (or so we like to believe). If there is cognitive, political, and ethical value in the provocative tactics of autoexoticism, then surely we too should be putting ourselves at risk by adopting

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those tactics. Surely we too should foreground ourselves, engage in stylistic experiment, and endeavor to shock or move our readers. But, of course, to do that would mean disrupting the established and differently valuable conventions of academic writing. The autoexotic therefore raises with particular force a question about the relation between language and metalanguage. How much continuity should there be between the writing we discuss and the writing with which we discuss it?

This issue (which is, in general terms, as old as literary criticism itself) haunts recent discussions of critical practice in a world literature context, where it has become all the more pressing for not being explicitly formulated. In *Death of a Discipline*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak focused on the languages studied by literary scholars but not on the language with which we do our studying: she argued for "the kind of language training that would disclose the irreducible hybridity of all languages" (9) but not for a critical practice that would reveal and exploit the hybridity of academic language. In "Global Comparatism and the Question of Language," David Damrosch observes that "if we wish to respond to the opportunities and the challenges offered to comparatism by globalization, we will need to rethink our relation to the national languages and literatures that have long been the focus of comparative study" (622); but he does not suggest that we might need to rethink our use of the standard languages and critical practices that have long been the medium of comparative study. Even Emily Apter, who is so alert to the nuances of French, German, and Portuguese philosophical terms as she argues that "incommensurability and what has been called the Untranslatable are insufficiently built into the literary heuristic" (3), nevertheless performs an impressive work of translation and commensuration as she absorbs those words into the powerfully explanatory medium of her own American English academic prose. While brilliantly attentive to the languages of literature, none of these interventions brings their own linguistic behavior into question.

In consequence, the language practices of world literary study in the Anglo-American academy are increasingly paradoxical. Monographs and articles celebrate inventively translingual and multilingual writing while remaining themselves unwobblingly monolingual and hyperstandard. One prominent recent example is Rebecca Walkowitz's *Born Translated* (2015). Focusing on writers like J. M. Coetzee, Junot Díaz, Nancy Huston, Jamaica Kincaid, Orhan Pamuk, and Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries, Walkowitz draws attention to the shifts that happen between languages, both in multilingual texts and when texts move through languages by way of translation. Such work, she argues, needs to be seen as emerging from and into a multilingual environment and as existing in a medium of translation rather than belonging to any national language or tradition. In her conclusion, she writes:

> These works use facing-page translation, serial translation, minor-to-major translation, diegetic translation, and English-to-English translation as ways of imagining other literary histories and other audiences. Born-translated fiction in English asks readers to unforget those audiences. This means learning new languages. It also means engaging with English as a medium of circulation while learning about the history and future of that medium. (245)

According to this vision, born-translated fiction has inaugurated a widespread cultural and epistemological shift. It asks us to recognize the inadequacies of adhering to a single standard language. One key inadequacy consists in the limitations of a language's descriptive terms. Descriptions are always made from a point of view and imply the supremacy of the language group in which that point of view is embodied.

The argument is compelling. So it is all the more strange that the language in which

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the claim about language is expressed manifests none of the features that the claim about language recommends. Throughout Walkowitz's book, standard academic American English disciplinary rules are obeyed. For example, languages other than English appear very rarely and only in quotations or italics. There is no foregrounding of translational practice in the text's own linguistic procedures. There is no use of different Englishes and no address to varied audiences. The intended readership for the book is never explicitly stated, but it is signaled from the start:

> Translation saturates our everyday culture of reading, writing, and viewing. Whether you're searching the Internet or streaming a video on Netflix, languages seem to be readily available and more or less interchangeable. Films and books, too, are saturated by translation, and indeed the lines between established and emergent media are not so clear. Consider that many books are released—or as we say, delivered—not only in print, as cloth-bound or paperback editions, but also in electronic files as DVD, MP3, or Kindle editions. (3)

Who says "delivered"? Whose "everyday culture of reading, writing, and viewing" is this? And who has ready access to the technology of Netflix, Kindles, and MP3s? I do not reproach *Born Translated* for having a target readership. But it is surprising that a book that celebrates the power of literary writing to imagine other audiences, and the potential of the English language to be a freely combinatory medium of global circulation, does not imagine other audiences for itself or in any way dislocate its own standard, academic American English idiom.

More than the author, it is the institution of Anglo-American literary study that has brought this paradox into being, with our shared assumptions about the nature of critical argument and the medium of the academic monograph. The phenomenon is widespread. To cite just one further instance, Juliette Taylor-Batty's *Multilingualism in Modernist Fiction* (2013) exhibits the same peculiarity as *Born Translated*: it uses standardized language to celebrate writing that rejects standardized language. Taylor-Batty explains that the "complex interlingual and intercultural exchanges" in Jean Rhys could not be adequately represented in "a 'natural,' idiomatic English" (104), even though Taylor-Batty herself uses a natural, idiomatic English when she represents and analyzes them in her critical prose. In her wider discussion of modernist multilingualism, Taylor-Batty recognizes that "there is a tension between the discourse that the writer wants to represent and the language/s that s/he would use as a means of representing it," since the literary texts she discusses are never "as polylingual as the fictional world they represent": we need to see that the languages of the fictional world have been "at least partially 'translated' into the dominant language of the text" (39). Yet Taylor-Batty does not remark on the tension between her own discourse and languages of the writing she discusses, nor does she consider the processes of translation by which they are absorbed into the dominant language of her text.

But, you might ask, why should she? We don't require a study of *Don Juan* to be composed in ottava rima or ask scholars of Woolf to write their criticism in stream of consciousness. The difference is that Walkowitz and Taylor-Batty are analyzing the politics of representation, and so invite consideration of the politics of their own representational strategies. Discussions of world literature are not published and read on Mars; they are themselves caught up in, and help create, the medium and mode of circulation that they describe. They therefore have a responsibility, just as literary works do, to open themselves, in their own texture, to different languages and styles of representation.

That said, critical and theoretical writing needs also to mark its differences from

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fictional, dramatic, and poetic composition: it has different strategies and ends (for instance, rational argument with the aim of persuasion, such as this part of this essay is itself engaged in). Taylor-Batty's "tension" and "translation" are helpful prompts here, even though Taylor-Batty does not connect these terms to her own work. The critical text need not adopt the same language-political characteristics as the writing it discusses, but it should acknowledge that there is a tension when it does not do so. This tension forms a gradient across which translation can pass.

Translation was well described by Antoine Berman as a process of "féconder le Propre par la médiation de l'Étranger" 'fertilizing, impregnating, or fecundating the known, the own, the clean, the "proper," by means of the foreign and the strange' (16). To be fecundated is not to become the same as the source text but to take something of it into one's own growth and life—that is, if one is writing a critical argument, to allow it to be informed by something of the language and tactics of the text being discussed. A model might be Gloria Anzaldúa, in *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, whose text is inflected with the language of the communities she describes:

> On the gulf where I was raised, *en el Valle del Rio Grande* in South Texas—that triangular piece of land wedged between the river *y el golfo* which serves as the Texas-U.S./Mexican border—in a Mexican *pueblito* called Hargill (at one time in the history of this one-grocery-store, two-service-stations town there were thirteen churches and thirteen *cantinas*). (57)

The conjunction of *pueblito* and Hargill achieves exactly that imagining of diverse audiences that Walkowitz admires in literature but cannot manage in her own text.

Another instructive example is Angela Leighton's account of Vernon Lee's "A Wicked Voice," in *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word*. This monograph does not present itself as a contribution to the study of world literature, and the story discussed is not markedly multilingual; but notice how Leighton allows her own writing to be fecundated by the language of the source:

> Related to these airs and vapours is that recurring yellow. The "scrap" of paper which catches in the "yellow blind" also catches in a network of references: the "yellow satin sofas" (210) of the dream, the "yellow, reflected light" (215) of the miasmal lagoon, the "yellow" (224) plaque on the statues in the church, the "yellow light" (226) of the acacia hedges on the mainland, culminating in the malarial "yellow faces of the peasants" (230) at Mistrà. Thus malaria pervades the text, textually cued by that little "scrap" of paper which will not be destroyed, but insists, like any ghost, on coming back. Just as cholera runs through Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* (1912), another text which asserts the aestheticist creed of being "indifferent to good and evil," so malaria gives Lee an imagery, not only of a sickness long associated with Venice, but also of that decadence which spawned so many infectiously risky yellow books. Airs, vapours, and moonlight transmute, readily, from sense to sense, as the text plays out the ghosts in what should be safe and sane meanings. (121)

Lee's words are kept in quotes, according to the conventions of academic writing, and yet they permeate the texture of Leighton's writing, showing that the critical encounter includes an element of haunting as well as analysis. In allowing her own affective involvement with the story onto the page, so that (like malaria) it might spread to readers, Leighton adopts some of the tactics of autoexoticism as described in this cluster of essays: her identity mingles with the object of her attention, and her criticism becomes a transcreative and relational mode of writing.

An autoexoticist mode of criticism hit me with some strength when I encountered a work by the Mexican artist Jorge Méndez Blake. Allow me, now, to bring it into tension with the style of writing I have adopted up to this point.

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I was standing in a small white room on the first floor of a three-hundred-year-old house in Albemarle Street off Piccadilly in London, now part of Faggionato, an art gallery (fig. 1). The work consisted of metal rods that had been propped against the wall. Salomé Prada, the gallery assistant who had invited me, explained that they were created by a mechanical process from Spanish translations of the poems in James Joyce's wan 1907 volume *Chamber Music*. The number of letters in each translated poem was counted, and this number was used to determine the length of the corresponding rod. There was much gain in this process of transmedial translation: a gain of volume and mass. And there was also much loss: loss of the words, with their music and meanings.

I looked at the work. Filaments of words flitted through my awareness as the sculpture became mingled with my attention. I noted with pleasure this confirmation of my belief that language permeates all areas of perception and response and of my resistance to the view that there can be a primary encounter with nonverbal artworks that is forever beyond the reach of language. Nevertheless, a large part of the point of this Méndez Blake sculpture was that it had destroyed words, had turned verbal texts into nonrepresentational material objects. It was a silently eloquent instance of the anthropophagous, South American poetics referred to in this issue by both Adriana Jacobs and Xiaofan Amy Li. It did not so much write back to the European imperial center as chew up its texts and spit them back (though the fact that the source text was by Joyce rather than, say, Tennyson, was complicating that thought). So to retranslate this work back into language, which is what Prada had asked me to do, would have been to destroy what was most important in it. But then perhaps that would be a sort of revenge for the similar violence



FIG. 1
*Chamber Music*, by Jorge Méndez Blake. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

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that Méndez Blake had wrought on Joyce's poems, an autoexoticizing reaction. Yes, words would have to be found, in the teeth of the feeling that no words could quite fit.

After a while I started to write, in a style that, like Leighton's on the subject of Vernon Lee, took on something of the shape of the object being described:

Propped
against a white wall
black and grey
and white
poles

which might be
but are not dove
grey and gull grey and sea
grey and ice
white and sleet grey and cloud-white and
death black

no
I do think some of them are death black
that one for example is death black

even though it is also one of an array
of batons which you might
seize and twirl and launch
and send soaring spinning
making a propeller howl, a lure,
you a cat watching as it
drops, and you watch, and you catch
a staff with which (no longer a cat)

you thump
the floor calling to order
calling to combat
a kendo shinai
kiai kiai you call
as you wield
this stick to bastinado whose back?

even though taken together
the poles and sticks and batons and staffs
form a graph
which might be made of enormous graphite
pencil leads
or zirconium fuel rods not charged with
Uranium-235
but charged with something since they are
lined up
against a wall
with a firing squad en face

for here there is no
residue
of Goldenhair
Silvery arches spanning the air
All maidenly aglow

there is not even a fingerprint
or stain such as might be for example
Den ha nin heair ma lo
Tmu houf me na
Sil ar an heair
Lig lyl eb lew eto

but 36 columns
of aluminium of variable dimensions
80.8–294.7 cm 2.5 cm diameter
31⅘–116 in 1 in diameter
each of which
must at some point have been
placed as an anode in an acid
electrolytic solution so as to accrete
a thick oxide layer and then been sliced
and then been painted so as to form

a work that is significantly blank

not in fact made up of blow-pipes nor
organ-pipes nor wind-chimes
unstrung and propped against the white wall
of this chamber even though when the wind
nips in and nudges one or another of them a
domino
tumble may happen, a pick-a-stick catastrophe
of slip and slither and bounce and roll which
might just make
a sort of music. (43–46)

One way in which the words of this critical description adopt some of the tactics of autoexoticism is that they mimic the shape of the work they are translating. Different kinds of language—including technical, poetic, and disintegrated—have been brought together, and there are quotations that are not attributed. In those respects I allowed my authorial selfhood to become hybrid and blurred. Because the lines develop rhythm, they also take on some emotiveness, a feeling (I hope) of el-

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egy, since the artwork has to do with loss and death. Perhaps there are other feelings in the lines. The splurge of words, is it not suggestive of some unease, that I should babble so when confronted with this display of long, hard rods? So there is another autoexotic touch: an openness to the possibility of embarrassment, a positioning of my own utterance and a putting of myself at risk, including the risk of being thought self-advertising, since autoexoticism always includes an element of display.

Not every autoexoticist work need call for this degree of autoexoticist criticism. Yet, if we are serious in proposing that autoexoticist literature is epistemologically generative and ethically valuable because of its risky, performative, and affective qualities, then there should always be some translational tension between it and the criticism that goes to work on it. If not, the criticism will fail to register the fecundative challenge of the text it encounters, instead forcing the exploratory and the transformative back into the terms of the already known. Autoexoticism should breed autoexoticriticism.

## Note

Translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

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