THE CREATIVE WRITER AS POLYGLOT: VALERY LARBAUD AND SAMUEL BECKETT

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Twentieth century writers have instinctively felt the need to express themselves in more than one language. Few writers before 1900 had achieved literary distinction in a second language; John Gower, Chaucer's contemporary, did his major work in English, French and Latin, but he stands as a fairly isolated case.¹ There is certainly nothing to challenge the astonishing surge of modern authors who have made polyglot tendencies an essential aspect of their craft.

Rilke, Eliot and Pound, among the poets, have experimented widely with foreign languages. Rilke, profiting from his stay in France as Rodin's secretary, turned out some late lyrics in French. Eliot wrote four French poems for the 1920 collection of his verse; offered a loose translation of the final section of one of these, "Dans le Restaurant," as part IV of The Waste Land; and used foreign language borrowings in all his major poetry. Pound is famous for the Chinese ideograms and other obscure references in The Cantos and for his "translations" from the Chinese, Cavalcanti, Fontenelle, etc.

Among the novelists, James Joyce exhibits the most impressive linguistic range. His life was divided among four European capitals—Dublin, Paris, Trieste and Zurich—which gave him fluency in English, French, Italian and German. His last two works show not only a competence with innumerable languages and dialects but also an unmatched creative vigor which has given birth to the portmanteau words and verbal plays of Finnegans Wake.

A more unusual case is Vladimir Nabokov who had a successful literary career in Russian until about 1940 when he moved to America and started writing exclusively in English. Works like Pnin and Lolita convince us of his stylistic fluency in his adopted language. He was forced to make virtually the same linguistic adjustment as Joseph Conrad who was born of Polish parents in the Ukraine, but unlike Conrad whose published works are exclusively in English Nabokov not only changed language but readjusted literary standards. The recent Invitation to a Beheading, Nabokov's

¹There are, of course, writers like Dante who divided their talents between Latin and the vernacular. Yet for Dante, the literary language was always Italian, the "vulgar", while Latin was saved for the more didactic works like his De Monarchia.
first Russian work to appear in English, shows the remarkable difference between the American and Russian phases of the same literary personality.

We might endlessly multiply the number of contemporary writers who either use their vast linguistic acquaintance as a literary device or write in several languages. For the first group, cosmopolitanism seems a genuine concern; linguistic and literary boundaries have ceased to offer a serious challenge. Valéry Larbaud has echoed this feeling convincingly in a diary notation which dates from 1912:

... Tout écrivain français est international, il est poète, écrivain, pour l'Europe entière et pour une partie de l'Amérique par surcroît. ... Tout ce qui est "national" est sot, archaïque, basement patriottique. ... C'était bon dans des circonstances particulières et à des époques particulières, mais tout cela est révolu. Il y a un pays d'Europe.8

Valéry Larbaud was himself one of the most astonishing "littérateurs" of his time. This French writer who died in Vichy in 1957 was active as a novelist, poet, critic and translator. He deservedly prided himself on reviving neglected literary reputations and introducing new talents. His biographer G.-Jean Aubry speaks of a youthful translation of Coleridge's Rime of the Ancient Mariner, published at the age of twenty and redone ten years later. We are told also of Larbaud's early devotion to Whitman which ended in some translations and a preface.4 He may be said to have done for Walt Whitman in France what the Symbolist poets of an earlier generation had done for Edgar Poe.

Larbaud wrote an important preface to Faulkner's As I Lay Dying which accompanied Maurice Coindreau's 1934 French translation of the novel (Tandis que j'agonise). He made the same kind of seminal observations about Faulkner's technique as he had made thirteen years earlier in his now-famous December 7, 1921 lecture on James Joyce.

These translations and prefaces, however, do not stand as mere exercises in technique. They are part of a skillful pattern which runs through Larbaud's work; the critic and translator always make way for the creative writer. When Larbaud goes further afield and uses his other linguistic accomplishments—he apparently had mastered not only English but also Italian, Spanish and Portuguese—he seems to enrich his own novels and short stories. One never ceases to be impressed by the number of writers Larbaud

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2 This work was translated by Nabokov's son Dmitri "in collaboration with the author."
4 See Georges May, "Valéry Larbaud: Translator and Scholar," Yale French Studies, number 5, p. 86. I am indebted to this article for many of my remarks on Larbaud's translations.
has translated into French. A partial list would include Samuel Butler, Francis Thompson, Liam O'Flaherty, Robert Louis Stevenson, Arnold Bennett, Edith Sitwell, Archibald MacLeish, James Joyce, Walter Savage Landor from the English; Bruno Barilli, Ricardo Bacchelli, Gianna Manzini, Emilio Cecchi from the Italian; Ricardo Güiraldes, Alfonso Reyes, Ramón Gómez de la Serna, Gabriel Miró from the Spanish.

But these are more than mere renderings from one language to another. They are, in almost every instance, the work of a polyglot endowed with a distinguished literary sensibility. The Samuel Butler translations, which occupied five years of Larbaud's time and prevented him from handling the translation of Joyce's *Ulysses* by himself, were a herculean task and one of the most successful renderings of Butler in any language. "Valery Larbaud's translations of Erewhon, *The Way of All Flesh, Life and Habit, Erewhon Revisited* and the *Note-Books* appeared in the 20's: they stand as an unmatched model of courage, energy, probity, love, intelligence and ingenuity; they are the most eloquent reply to those who, emulating La Bruyère or Montesquieu's geomter, still maintain that a translator does not need to think."  

Larbaud's translations come very close to being "original" versions. There are certainly Whitmanesque elements in Larbaud's early collection of poetry, *Les Poésies de Barnabooth*; and in turn the Whitman translations impress one as the closest French equivalent of the original verse—given the differing conditions of French and English prosody. The mature style of Samuel Butler blends in curiously with Larbaud's prose style of the 1920's and the result is a Butler which reads almost as well in French as in English. (The only French translation I know of which rivals its sympathetic understanding of the original is Proust's Ruskin.) Larbaud seems as much at ease with poetry as with prose; one cannot accuse him of favoring one medium over the other in his translations.

This remarkable record points up the creative aspect of translation. Larbaud has always remained faithful to De Sanctis' rule for the translator: "*A modo suo, e con tono e con accento suo.*" His large fortune which has permitted him the leisure of sustained periods of travel and wide non-professional reading has helped support his own image of the "*riche amateur*" and "*l'homme européen*." But with this seeming extravagance and lack of professionalism has gone the sacred position Larbaud has always accorded the translator. His *Sous l'Invocation de Saint Jérôme* (1946) is a series of appreciative and interpretive essays on the role of translation from the time of Saint Jerome's *Vulgate* through the present.

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* Georges May, pp. 87–88.
day. Larbaud acknowledges the thankless task of a profession which reproduces but which does not "create" in the accepted sense. He asks for more sympathetic understanding for a "calling" which deserves a position closer to the more creative disciplines. He explains convincingly the difficulty of the translator's task: "... pour rendre ce sens littéraire des ouvrages de littérature, il faut d'abord le saisir; et il ne suffit pas de le saisir: il faut encore le recréer."

Despite Larbaud's singular dedication to translation, his career does not stop here. As an occasional essayist he has also put to the test his astonishing command of languages. Not only has he written widely about foreign literature and analyzed specialized problems in English, Romance and Germanic linguistics, but has also occasionally written in one or the other of his adopted languages. Such articles as "La influencia francesa en las literaturas de lengua castellana" which appeared in El Nuevo Mercurio (April 1907) and "Figuras del simbolismo francés: Edouard Dujardin" which appeared in La Nación (March 15, 1925) attest to his written knowledge of Spanish. His English seems even more natural, less acquired than his Spanish if one reads his "Rebirth of American Poetry" which appeared in Living Age (December 8, 1921) or any of his Paris letters which appeared in The New Weekly (London) between March 21 and August 8, 1914. In the two volumes of the Journal inédit, which Gallimard brought out in 1954 and 1955, one finds a great deal of English interspersed with the French and occasional passages in other languages. Larbaud has appropriately commented in the first volume: "... à force de lire l'anglais, ma pensée avait pris l'habitude de s'exprimer spontanément dans cette langue."

But these spurts of foreign-language writing are after all only occasional and are mere mechanical evidences of Larbaud's skill as a polyglot. More genuine certainly are the numerous foreign expressions which appear so functionally in his fiction. Larbaud seems virtually incapable of relying wholly on his native French in his stories and novels. For example, the dedication of the title story of his volume of three novellas Amants, heureux amants... (1923) gives us notice of its polyglot tendencies: "to James Joyce, my friend and the only begetter of the form I have adopted in this piece of writing." "The form" obviously refers to the stream-of-consciousness method which runs through Larbaud's stories in this collection. But it may also have some connection with Joyce's reliance on foreign languages as a fictional technique, as a means for expanding his literary point of reference.

The final novella in the volume, *Mon plus secret conseil*, depends on Larbaud’s knowledge of other languages. There is almost a systematic plan at work which causes the narrator to use Italian when he remembers a passionate embrace with one of his lovers, English when the sophistication of another woman controls the direction of his thoughts, Greek when his devotion to literature seems more important than his liaisons. One characteristic passage which exploits Larbaud’s reliance on several languages is the following which concludes *Mon plus secret conseil*:

Et vers Irène je vais . . .
M'endormir dans la pensée d'Irène.
Irène, ti voglio
tanto
tanto bene
moglie mia!
Comme on est bien seul et bien soi au seuil du sommeil
Comme
moi en ce moment, entrant
en moi-même, sous le
voile ... Le petit ani-
mal inquiet rentrait sous
non, dans, son terrier. Ciao!
Cette espèce de
petit renoncement au monde: pratique, quotidien, de poche:
le sommeil. Irène?
L’effort pour l’oublier? pour renoncer aussi à
ça, à ces liens?
A Paris, je verrai ...
J’aurais dû
emporter le service à faire le thé en voyage.
Cette petite flamme bleue dan
la boîte propre, luisante,
(métal argenté, Drew and Sons,
Piccadilly Circus)
“So when I am wearied ...” you petite
flamme bleue dans le soir en voyage
quand la Face de la Terre pâlit. Ah! ...

Pouvoir renoncer à Irène serait bien. . . Quelle ruse employer
envers moi-même? La distance? Ne pas même passer rue de Magde-
bourg voir sa maison. Entreprendre un long travail très absorbant.
Renforcer l’égotisme. Cultiver ma timidité . . . ah ah! Oh, Dio! dor-
mire, dormire . . . Si, già . . .
Passer le mois de mai en Sicile? . . .
Ou à Corfou? . . .

English and Italian blend in with the French here to reinforce the multi-lingual sensibility on the verge of sleep. This is a good example of the instinctive readiness of the Larbaud character to think in several languages and to reverse language as he reverses mood.

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The Joycean strains are of course evident in this passage—both the interior monologue technique and the polyglot tendencies. Larbaud’s background as first critic and defender of Ulysses and translator of certain sections of the work have been justly rewarded in Larbaud’s own fiction. But Larbaud, unfortunately, took no part in the French translation of the Anna Livia Plurabelle section of Joyce’s Work in Progress, published in 1931 in the Nouvelle Revue Française.

Samuel Beckett, another polyglot, was on hand for this occasion. Beckett, also a friend and critical defender of the Irish writer, began his literary career with an essay on Joyce which appeared in Our Examination round his Factification for Incarnation of Work in Progress (1929). He helped with the 1931 translation of “Anna Livia Plurabelle” and then remained virtually silent as a translator until the 1950’s. Unlike Valéry Larbaud, Beckett’s achievement has never been principally measured by his translations. He belongs to the second group of polyglots, those who write in more than one language.

Beckett wrote most of his stories, novels and poems in English until he published the first volume of the Molloy-Malone meurt-L’Innommable trilogy in 1951. From then on he has written virtually everything in French, including his first attempts at playwriting, En attendant Godot (1953) and Fin de partie (1957). The exceptions have been All That Fall, a radio drama which was broadcast over the B.B.C. Third Programme in 1957, and the succession of monodramas, including Krapp’s Last Tape and Embers, which were originally published in Evergreen Review and have since been collected in a volume by Grove Press.

As soon as Beckett took to writing in French he set himself up as his own translator. (Perhaps Nabokov got the idea from him when he assisted his son with Invitation to a Beheading.) He enlisted the help of Patrick Bowles with Molloy—probably feeling uncomfortable in his first attempt at translating a work of this length into English—but has since relied on his own devices.

Beckett’s bilingual facility, which has become apparent in the Fifties, has allowed him to rely on the language which has seemed most congenial in handling a given fictional situation. Few writers have been “ambidextrously” suited to change language whenever

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* One noteworthy exception is “Poèmes 38-39”, a group of poems he published in French in Les Temps Modernes in November 1946.
* Beckett has been less active in the task of translating his English work into French. He performed admirably with his “self-translation” of Murphy. But in the case of the recent translation of Krapp’s Last Tape (in French La Dernière Bande), for example, the work was done by Pierre Leyris although as Guy Verdut wrote in the March 13, 1960 Le Figaro Littéraire “l’auteur y revint jusqu’au bon à tirer.” (p. 3)
they have felt aesthetically disposed. As I have said before, Beckett seems to be quite a different writer when he uses French from what he had previously been when he relied solely on English. The lighthearted, jovial qualities which abound in *Murphy* and *Watt* are nowhere evident in the trilogy written in French. Likewise, among the plays, *All That Fall*, despite its tragic overtones, thrives on comic relief, while *En attendant Godot* and *Fin de partie* thrive on the trapped and isolating ingredients of a Sartre or a Genet. Beckett seems intent on changing literary personality as he changes language.

The final proof that Beckett did not arbitrarily change language in the Fifties is that he did revert to his native English for the occasional monodramas and radio plays he wrote from 1957 on. The Irish wit, recalling his Dublin youth, seems so much a part of everything he has written in his native English, while the French undercurrent of neo-existentialism and “absurdism” goes well with the works written in his acquired French.

Beckett, unlike Larbaud, rarely uses more than a single language in a given work. His knowledge of languages is perhaps quantitatively more restricted than Larbaud’s, although he is surer in his second language, French, than Larbaud is in his—whether it be English or Spanish. It is not quite accurate to speak of Beckett as being only bilingual as he has shown facility in Spanish through his translation of a large number of Mexican poems into English for inclusion in *An Anthology of Mexican Poetry* (1958). He has apparently also supervised to some extent the translation of *En attendant Godot* into German and Italian:

> Godot a été publié en turc, en hébreu, en persan, et Beckett ne laisse à personne le soin de revoir les textes en allemand et en italien, deux langues qu’il possède aussi bien que le français et l’anglais.

But still Beckett’s type of the polyglot favors the profound immersion in two languages which can be used interchangeably. When he translates from one to the other, even though the original seems more suitable because Beckett has willfully chosen it the translation is naturally a very apt substitute. However competent a translator Larbaud is when he undertakes turning Samuel Butler into French, however much he has mastered the theoretical code of the translator, one must still prefer Beckett’s trilogy in Beckett’s own translation. The idea of genuinely “original” versions in two languages is quite intriguing.

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Thus we have with Valery Larbaud and Samuel Beckett the two types of the polyglot. Larbaud uses his knowledge of languages as a literary device. His translations of other writers serve to enrich his own work. Samuel Beckett, on the other hand, alternates between French and English as the mood dictates. Although he knows fewer languages than Larbaud and is infinitely less cosmopolitan, Beckett has the more professional awareness of the writer who can explain a literary situation equally well in two languages.