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GASPAROV, BORIS. ***Beyond Pure Reason. Ferdinand de Saussure's Philosophy of Language and Its Early Romantic Antecedents.*** New York : Columbia University Press, 2013. 248pp.

The academic Saussure industry – for that is what it has nowadays become – continues to flourish. It rivals both the Marx industry and Freud industry. Translations and commentaries follow one another in rapid succession. Interpretations of its central figure proliferate accordingly. The latest, a Romantic Saussure, is conjured up by Boris Gasparov in the book reviewed here.

Gasparov is a professor of Russian who emigrated from Estonia to the United States in 1981. He proposes for our consideration a Saussure whose thinking about language and the human condition is rooted in “the thousands of semi-improvised fragments written by Novalis and Friedrich Schlegel in the period between 1795 and 1801” (11). Many will find this new approach to Saussure’s intellectual ancestry both surprising and difficult to accept.

Romantic is the last word that comes to mind on reading Saussure’s precocious treatise on the Indo-European vowel system or the *Cours de linguistique générale* itself. It is difficult to imagine that either work would have been so described by the contemporaries to whom they were addressed. On the contrary, in both cases Saussure’s main concern, at least on first inspection, seems to be to introduce a rational order into linguistic material that would otherwise seem chaotic. In the *Cours* (139) we are given a sketch of what Saussure calls *la forme rationnelle* of a programme for linguistics. (The expression *forme rationnelle* is confirmed by the students’ notes.)

For Gasparov, Saussure’s Romanticism resides in his failure to resolve – even his indifference to – the theoretical contradictions that lurk behind his most famous pronouncements. These include the celebrated dichotomies between *langue* and *parole*, and between synchrony and diachrony. But this is not all :

Saussure’s identification with the methodological premisses of the “new physics” (and also, perhaps, the “new chemistry” of Ostwald and Mendelev) was just the flip side of his scornful rejection of the old-fashioned scientific claims of the Neogrammarians (65).

But where is the evidence of Saussure’s ‘identification’ with any ‘new physics’ or ‘new chemistry’? One looks in vain for even a mention of electrolyte solutions or periodic tables (first proposed by Mendelev in 1869) in the Saussurean corpus. Worse still, where is the ‘scornful rejection’ of the Neogrammarians? On the contrary, the Introduction to the *Cours* praises the Neogrammarians for having placed ‘all the results of comparative philology in a historical perspective, so that linguistic

facts were connected in their natural sequence' (*Cours* : 18-19). It would be perverse either to ignore this praise, or to read into it anything other than Saussure's due acknowledgment of the debt that linguistics owed to the work of Brugmann, Osthoff, Paul and their colleagues. In the same passage in the *Cours*, the approach of the Neogrammarians is contrasted with what might well be called the 'Romantic' view of a language, *i.e.* as "an organism developing of its own accord" (*Cours* : 19). Further praise for the Neogrammarians is given in *Cours* (223), where they are credited with being the first to recognize the role of analogy ("*sa vraie place*") in linguistic change. Thus Saussure's 'scorn' for the achievements of the Neogrammarians turns out to be a figment of Gasparov's imagination. Any temptation to scour the pages of the early Romantics for proto-Saussurean ideas diminishes accordingly.

It might be said in defence of Gasparov, however, that particularly in the First Course Saussure seems inclined to treat *la langue* as an organism with an analysis *sui generis*, which sets the standard by which all other analyses are to be judged. He told his students :

One of the dangers of linguistics is to mix decompositions made from different viewpoints with [those] made by *la langue*; but it is a good idea to make the parallel [and to confront the procedures of the grammarian in decomposing the word into its units with the procedure of speakers. Through] such an opposition we shall better be able to define how far internal and instinctive analysis goes (Komatsu & Wolf 1996 : 82a).

The 'Romantic' assumption here seems to be that all speakers of a given language automatically make the same assumptions about its analysis. In other words, we are back with one of the twin fallacies constitutive of the traditional language myth.

According to Gasparov, 'radical negativity' is the fundamental feature of Saussure's thinking.

The radicalism of Saussure's negativity was always a sticking point even for those who were otherwise positively disposed towards his theory. As has been pointed out more than once, the world as perceived by human consciousness is not an empty space waiting to be filled by language in some fashion or other. Thought prior to the sign is not totally amorphous : it already presents experience organized into 'proto-concepts' (79).

The above passage is evidently intended as a rebuttal of Saussure's claim (*Cours* : 155) that "in itself thought is like a swirling cloud, where no shape is intrinsically determinate. No ideas are established in advance, and nothing is distinct, before the introduction of *la langue*". In order to evaluate either the claim or the rebuttal, it would be necessary to have a clear example of 'thought prior to the sign'. But none is proposed. Nor is it evident where such an example could come from. So in effect we are invited first to settle the abstract issue one way or another, and then apply it to linguistic experience. This amounts to a kind of neo-Kantian approach, which surfaces constantly in *Beyond*

Pure Reason.

To dwell on the title for a moment, it is hard to see that there could be a 'pure reason' independent of signs of any variety. Not, at least, if reason is taken as articulating the kind of relationship involved in the Aristotelian syllogism. Nor is there any case for supposing that ratiocination about the world we live in involves on the one hand 'pure reason' combined or diluted on the other hand with the impurities derived from empirical observation.

None of this gives Gasparov pause. He detects 'a pronounced parallel' between Husserl's phenomenology and Saussure's 'negative epistemological strategy'.

Like Husserl, Saussure proceeds by taking away all of the substantial features of language, both "objective" and "subjective" : [...] Demonstrable as they are when one observes how people speak, the substantial material and psychological features of language are not transcendental in the sense that they do not exist as a priori (in Saussure's terms, *véritable*) dimensions of language outside the manifold conditions of its usage (65).

Saussure calls the transcendental object that emerges out of this reductionist critique *la langue*. [...] *La langue* is a construct in which language is reduced to its inalienable features, the ones that belong to it unconditionally (65-6).

Thus Gasparov presents Saussure's work as the ruminations of a kind of latter-day Aristotle, convinced in advance that *logos* has its own essence in every manifestation. "At stake is the essential nature of language" (121). Whatever transcendental objects may be (Gasparov never stops to tell us), they are presumably revealed by some process of abstraction. But Saussure insists that linguistic signs are not abstractions (*Cours* : 32) : "The associations, ratified by collective agreement, which go to make up *la langue*, are realities localised in the brain".

Gasparov's emphasis on negativity entirely ignores the passages in which Saussure explains that the negativity of the linguistic sign applies only to the *signifié* and the *signifiant* considered in isolation.

But to say that in *la langue* everything is negative holds only for *signifié* and *signifiant* considered separately. The moment we consider the sign as a whole, we encounter something which is positive in its own domain. [...] Although *signifié* and *signifiant* are each, in isolation, purely differential and negative, their combination is a fact of a positive nature. It is, indeed, the only order of facts that *la langue* comprises (*Cours* : 166).

Also localised in the brain are the associations between sounds and spellings. A major lacuna in Gasparov's account is any discussion of Saussure's controversial marginalization of writing. Saussure's position on this issue is stated bluntly in Chapter 6 of the *Cours*. "A language and its written form constitute two separate systems of signs. The sole reason for the existence of the latter is to represent the former" (*Cours* : 45).

This might have been true in certain parts of the world several

thousand years ago. But in a highly literate modern society, the kind of society in which Saussure himself was brought up, it does not stand up to scrutiny for a moment. The community's reliance on written texts of all kinds is no less obvious than its reliance on speech. Furthermore, writing serves purposes that are beyond the reach of speech. The *raison d'être* of writing and its ubiquity in the modern world is to be sought in the manifest biomechanical limitations of the spoken word.

The reason why Saussure deliberately ignored this is not difficult to fathom. It is a major obstacle to constructing a unified theory of the linguistic sign. There is no sign which simultaneously has the characteristic properties of speech and writing. Nor could there be. It is no coincidence that writing is not mentioned once in Gasparov's book. Its author seems to be under the anachronistic illusion that the conditions of linguistic communication are fundamentally still those of pure orality. But the linguistics of orality is not the linguistics of literacy, and only confusion can ensue from continuing to ignore this even in the 21st century.

Leaving aside the issue of writing, the major fault line running through Gasparov's book is his constant conflation of *language* (singular) with *languages* (plural). For Saussure the former is *langage*, the latter *langues*.

Gasparov talks confusingly of "Saussure's thesis that language is a form and not substance" (109). But Saussure says nothing of the kind. For Saussure it is *la langue* that is a form, not a substance (*Cours* : 169). Furthermore,

The importance of this truth cannot be overemphasised. For all our mistakes of terminology, all our incorrect ways of designating things belonging to *la langue* originate in our unwittingly supposing that we are dealing with a substance when we deal with linguistic phenomena (*Cours* : 169).

Nor, *pace* Gasparov, did Saussure ever claim that "there is nothing in language but differences" (109). This is Gasparov's mistranslation of "*dans la langue il n'y a que des différences*" (*Cours* : 166). The mistranslation is pervasive. Saussure, according to Gasparov, maintained "the necessity of constructing language as the object of linguistics" (41). But this was never Saussure's contention : *la langue* – as the concluding sentence of the *Cours* asserts – is the *unique et véritable objet* of the discipline. Nor did Saussure ever assert that "language is a closed system" (41) : the closed system is *la langue*.

There is no doubt that Saussure told students who attended his third course that "*dans la langue il n'y a que des différences sans termes positifs*". Gasparov, like many other Saussurean commentators, is reluctant to confront the fact that here, at the heart of Saussure's teaching, lies a self-contradiction. Whichever way we look at it, whether in language or any other domain, we cannot have a difference without items between which the difference holds. It was irresponsible of Saussure to bemuse

his students with this logical conundrum without providing further explanation. The question that a commentator needs to confront is why Saussure chose to do so.

Gasparov submits that “tracing Saussure’s intellectual roots is not easy” because Saussure rarely referred to them (87). But this is nonsense. The Introduction to the *Cours* lists more than a dozen scholars whom Saussure regarded as having contributed to the development of linguistic studies. (These names are confirmed by the students’ notes. Gasparov ignores them. In fact, Gasparov’s bibliography does not even include Engler’s monumental edition of the students’ notes).

Saussure’s ability to raise fundamental epistemological questions concerning the subject and method of linguistic studies show him to have been abreast of contemporary epistemological ideas, without giving any tangible evidence about which authors and works he may have been aware of or familiar with (87).

This carefully worded evasion in effect situates Saussure in an intellectual vacuum, while dispensing Gasparov from the obligation of supplying any evidence in support of his own ‘Romantic’ Saussure. He admits that Saussure’s ‘public persona’ stands in stark contrast to “what we conventionally think of as a ‘Romantic personality’” (91). (Note Gasparov’s scare quotes). The contrast between Saussure’s ultimate goal as a linguistic theorist and his awareness of its unattainability reveal “a state of mind akin to that of the early Romantics in the 1790s, before Romanticism succumbed to sweeping utopianism and flamboyant rhetorical postures” (*Ibid.*). For this kinship, however, as for the history of Romanticism, we have only Gasparov’s assertion.

Saussure’s treatment of the evolution of language, says Gasparov, “reads at times like a linguistic incarnation of Bergsonian duration – without any sign of Bergson’s presence on his intellectual horizon”.

To use Saussurean terms, we can say that what surfaces as the outward representation of his ideas is only a set of “differences” by which his thought seeks to determine its place among a variety of concepts and approaches concerning theory of cognition, philosophy of language, sociology, anthropology psychology, studies of myth and modernist poetics. As to the “substance” of those differentiations, it remains almost entirely tacitly implied (88).

This may sound like Romanticism, but the Romanticism is Gasparov’s, not Saussure’s. Saussure’s thought does not ‘seek to determine its place’ anywhere. Only Saussure’s interpreters seek to do that.

Gasparov takes issue with Saussure’s comparison of language with chess. A chess game, says Gasparov mysteriously, “is *sequential*, not historical” (119). How a sequence of events can be timeless, or how a game of chess could be played ahistorically, he does not stop to explain. He suggests that a better analogy from games would be soccer “because

of the game's fluidity". No sequence of snapshots could ever capture "the unceasing and manifold movement of players in the field" (*Ibid.*). Gasparov's mistake here is that not *everything* that happens on the field of play constitutes the game. The referee is not concerned with players sneezing or tying up their bootlaces, but only with their conformity to the rules of the game. *Qua* referee, he has no other concern.

Presenting *la langue* either as a synchronic state or a diachronic chain of states, claims Gasparov, turned *la langue* into a "solid object" : it inaugurated "a substance of a new kind" (120). How theoretical pronouncements can actually produce new substances is an ontological puzzle that Gasparov's readers are left to resolve for themselves.

Gasparov is disinclined to distinguish between (i) Saussure the linguistic theorist, (ii) Saussure the university lecturer, and (iii) the 'off duty' Saussure given to toying tentatively with terminology and ideas. But unless a serious effort is made in this direction, one is inevitably left with a muddled Saussure who could never make up his mind.

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