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SOME REFLECTIONS ON LINGUISTIC CHAUVINISM

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About a year ago (*Journal des Traducteurs*, 9.3) Professor Darbelnet reviewed, in conjunction, Jacques Duron's *Langue française, langue humaine* (Larousse, Paris, 1963) and René Etiemble's definitive statement of his *cause célèbre* in *Parlez-vous français ?* (Gallimard, Paris, 1964), exhibiting in both commentaries his customary acuity and talent for provoking thought. We humbly (and belatedly) share our own reflections to which his gave rise :

● Most literature is culture-bound (no doubt properly so, since it is the work of humans). Even when it is transcendental, it is perforce reduced to the vernaculars and to the cultures they reflect (the competent translator can look both ways — but this does not mean his readers can !).

Science, however, since it partakes of nature as a whole, goes beyond language. Both Duron and Etiemble (the first more graciously) do violence to nature and science. Each of them enveloped in his own way by the particular culture they share, they are insensitive to the subtle boundaries between grammar and lexicon, between language and culture.

Cultural change — and any change is synonymous with decadence in the minds of some ! — was never brought about by lexical borrowing, though often enough the latter has accompanied it. And if the French of our generation are going to borrow English terms, no admonitions will stop them. As long as these words and phrases fill a vacuum, or relieve a tired metaphor, they will continue to flow in, for all the piety and wit of Etiemble.

● Humor is more lasting than righteous indignation. Though it was nearly eight years ago, we still remember well H. F. Ellis's jibe, in *Punch*, at the *Office du Vocabulaire français* for its circular listing an extensive array of anglicisms which self-respecting Frenchmen should shed or avoid.¹ Mr. Ellis suggested a retaliatory campaign to eliminate gallicisms from English. His examples, to be sure, do not go beyond such modern accretions as *tour de force*, *fait accompli*, *bric-à-brac*, etc. Faint-hearted, we say!

1 — See *Punch*, Aug. 14, 1957 : 180-182. These purification campaigns appear to run in cycles, the latest eruption now, in the wake of Etiemble's manifesto, being the appointment of a 12-man, De Gaulle-blessed *Haute Commission pour la défense et la propagation de la langue française*, the *défense* branch of which is of course dedicated to keeping *la langue maternelle* unsullied.

Why stop at that ? Let us do a thorough job of it and go back to 1066, when the whole thing started! It was at the beginning, of course, between eight and nine centuries ago, that the most devilish harm was wrought. Not only did the invaders proceed to make a shambles of native Eng'ish vocabulary, but by this very act of pumping masses of alien lexical material they further undermined the already ailing inflectional system of the language as well, thus forcing it once and for all onto a whole new course of subservience to syntactic grammar. . . Nor was this their first offence, really : if we push the word « Gallic » to its origins and construe Gaulish guilt as French guilt, think, then, what a mess they made of the Latin the Romans brought them !

● Can a language be pure ? Certainly not historically, as we have known since the 19th century philologists so dramatically upset the smug notions of the Age of Enlightenment on this subject. Still later it was found that, not only do languages diverge in time, but they also (given contact with one another) are known to *converge* in particular respects, without regard to family or ranch — sometimes subtly (consider the Balkan predilection for post-positive articles), sometimes through the superimposition of one culture upon another, as in the case of the Norman French lexicon foisted upon English. (Which brings us back to the current concerns of M. Etiemble regarding the debasement of French. . .). . . We have also learned, finally, from Sapir and others, that the built-in asymmetries of language make eternal change inevitable, even without the help of alien conquerors and infiltrators.

As the tangible manifestation of a culture, however, a language *can* be as enduring as the culture it serves and mirrors. It is this ostensible stability (abetted by the ability of scholars to read and understand older forms of the language) which is often erroneously identified with purity. But few of us can afford the luxury of living in time depth — and even the purist is unlikely to regard his French as a corrupted form of Latin! And if it is a question of French, which better behooves a spokesman for that civilization: me'odrama, or reason? Shall it be Cicero's *O tempora, o mores!*, or Lothair's *Tempora mutantur, nos et mutamur in illis* — ?

● When a nation (or a tribe, or even a clan) is threatened with vassalage or total submersion — or believes that it is, which in effect is the same — it fights back; and anything which carries the scent of the enemy is a legitimate target. (Fear of loss of identity is one of the deepest and most ancient of human phobias.) So a rising Prussia once extirpated the bulk of gallicisms from its language and replaced them with neologisms based on native roots.² Thus Iceland (albeit with the help of geography) kept its tongue free of the Hanseatic Low German which flooded Swedish, Danish and Norwegian. Even in England, the extravagances of the Renaissance, and the adulation of the Classical languages which marked the Age of Reason, were successfully counterbalanced by the English of the common man. . . And now, since 1948, we have a Hindustani lexically arabicized (Urdu) and another lexically sanskritized (Hindi), the better to sharpen the politico-religious cleavage between Pakistan and India.

Yet who is to judge preservation of self (real or fancied) as good or

2 — A quaint (and as ever in such cases, humorless) by-product of this movement were the « De-foreignization Dictionaries », or *Entwelschungswörterbücher*.

bad? It is again an attribute of human nature. And Etienne's fight against American incursions (it was the Americans he meant) may actually have some subconscious association with Dulles and the Plaine des Jarres.

● We turn, in closing, to the neo-Rivarolism of Duron, who finds French the prime vehicle of humanism (in the broadest sense). If this is a provincial attitude, it is certainly not restricted to France. Few, if any, are the monolingual nations in which the superiority of the mother tongue over all others has not been extolled!³

Perhaps everyone is right. No one can live without attachment to a culture, or («Breathes there a man with soul so dead...!») love for the surroundings of which he is truly part, and for the power and the music of the words of his own people. But if he presumes to venture into humanism, and speaks for universality, he should know there are other truths that are equally true; just as a city is many cities (and if you see it from the air, another city yet!).



3—The latest paean to the glory of English which has come to our attention is the work of Lincoln Barnett, an American journalist, entitled *The Treasure of Our Tongue: the Story of English from Its Obscure Beginnings to Its Present Eminence as the Most Widely Spoken Language*. New York, Knopf, 1964. xxxiii-304 pp. See this writer's review of same in *Library Journal* 89.21 (Dec. 1, 1964) : 4806.