World Literature and the Question of Language: Writers or Puppets?

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Panel: Writing as Philosophy and Craft

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Beaudelaine Pierre

I got into the business of writing through my father. While I was still young, he predicted that I would end up a writer. That’s not to suggest that I started writing at a young age. Rather, his prediction was based on my mastery of the French language, which he considered a trump card in a writer's career.

At school, I was punished for speaking Creole. The church we attended was no different. The pastor used Creole often during the ordinary worship services. But when he celebrated a marriage or performed a baptism, French was the only language allowed.

I live in a country where everyone speaks Haitian Creole; only about 15 per cent of the population speak French, and even then it is to varying degrees. For me, French has served as the language of knowledge, as the language that opens one to the world and as the exemplary language of writing. Quite naturally, my earlier writing is in French.

Some years later, at the College of the Humanities at the State University of Haiti, I wrote my final thesis in Creole, even though a number of my professors warned against it. It was my way of exposing certain contradictions within Haitian society, history and culture. After all, why would I write in a language spoken by so few in my country? From that point on, I wrote in Creole.

Please excuse me for having imposed my personal stories upon you. I am aware we are addressing today a question that touches the very heart of our social existence – the question of language. Language is a problem that touches each one of us, and at the same time, informs our individual and collective points of view.

Within the great debate on world literature, I have chosen to tackle the language question because, in my opinion, the debate over world literature is fundamentally a debate over languages.

How much weight does linguistic and cultural diversity carry within the concept of world literature? What is the role of the writer in society? As Antillese writer Edouard Glissant asked, “How can one be oneself without closing oneself to the other, and how can one open oneself to the other without losing oneself?”

In addressing this topic, I have relied upon the work of Jean-Marie Klinkenberg, an eminent Belgian professor whose works are well-regarded in the field of modern linguistics. I shall also draw from the works of Glissant and another distinguished Antillese writer, Wilson Harris.
I write what I speak

Literature is not a simple social act. It is the highest expression of human existence, in all its manifestations. The author Carlos Fuentes describes literature as the “revelation of humanity's cultural, personal and spiritual variety and the proof that the centers of power are in the process of loosening, transforming themselves to us to form new constellations.”

Literature attains this power because language provides the entire set of tools and materials, which in turn constitute the essence and the objective of the process.

Literature is built from each work, each play, each tongue, no matter the country of origin, no matter which culture, no matter what vision of the world gives birth to it. In this way, each nation has its own literature. As Nadine Ly writes in Language and Literature, “A writer works with what he has and what he has; above all else, is the feeling and the awareness of his language.” This assertion expressly conveys the kind of relationship that binds the writer to his work through his language.

This close link between language and literature exists not only because language forms literature’s basic element, but also because the individual is defined by the language he speaks or writes in. Each person eats, drinks, loves, sings and thinks in the language which he speaks. And yet nothing is said, eaten, drunk, loved, sung or thought in the same way. Language codifies experience, and vice versa. The writer works with the words in his language and possesses, more than any other speaker of his language, this awareness of working with words.

The principle sociopolitical and cultural asset any writer or poet possesses is the language he speaks. His language allows him to develop a certain vision of the world. Clearly, language is the most potent tool of expression and communication. It is the product of a culture and a civilization. Haitian Creole, for instance, permits us to think of the world in a certain way. English makes us think differently. The Chinese language provides yet another different viewpoint, and so on. Language provides us with an image and a concept of our world. Our expression is conceived in and developed from language.

Jean-Marie Klinkenberg rightly states in La langue et le Citoyen, “One lives not in a country, but in a language.” Likewise, Jacques Berque contends, “A language is not a means of communication, it is a way of being.” For this reason, no language exists on its own. Relying on Klinkenberg, I would go so far as to say that no language exists. What exist instead are people who speak a certain language. People everywhere engage in political, economic and social activities, which all find expression through language. This is why there has never been a battle between languages. No language can rise up against another, whether we are referring to “peoples,” groups separated geographically, or “people,” who share a country have different standards of living. Nirwan Dewanto, my Indonesian colleague here in the IWP, expressed the same sentiment in his presentation in a similar forum early this month.
I will stop short of defining English, French or Spanish as “the right language” (or languages) because their prevalence is partly drawn from their imperialistic history, and from the persuasive explanation that “they have longer literary traditions.” Because languages exist primarily for their social functions, it would be problematic to declare that where these “right languages” do not exist, there is a void in people’s political, economic and social experiences. Put another way, languages are there to serve people, not the other way round.

Beauty springs from diversity

According to Edouard Glissant and Wilson Harris, in their analysis of Antillean literature, the writer has the social responsibility of creating, from his own language, literary forms which express the destiny of people in search of their identity and who wish to have their various ways of representing the world recorded in literary works.

For these two authors, writing represents the only way to resurrect the traces left by “minority cultures” and to acknowledge the necessity of change and of mutual dialogue, which characterize every intercultural situation. Stephanie Ravilon, in an article on these two authors, writes: “Edouard Glissant considers writing to be the best way to understand the ceaseless mutations of being and to demonstrate that the clash of cultures can have other results apart from the negative ones.”

For his part, Edouard Glissant writes: “It will take a long time, but in today's global relations one of the most evident marks of literature, of poetry, of art, is to contribute little by little to making humanity admit ‘unconsciously’ that the other is not the enemy, that the different does not erode me, that if I change through my contact with him that does not mean that I will be diluted in him, etc. It seems to me that this is a form of combat distinct from that of the daily struggle and that the artist is well situated for this type of combat.”

In this way, the writer plays a crucial, but not unique, role by creating a literature of diverse thoughts. The writer’s principal role in his society is to contribute to the construction of a national literature that offers as many languages, as many visions of the ways of seeing and constructing the world, and as many literary forms as possible, within the vast field of world literature. This also means the writer must be open to external experiences and to participation in a global debate without renouncing oneself or one’s culture.

It may not, in fact, be a myth to say that a writer who engages in a language other than his mother tongue enriches the language in which he chooses to write. Modern linguistics offers examples of this truism. There is nothing wrong with a writer who sets out to enrich another language, because his work becomes a contribution to world languages and, therefore, to world literature. What is fundamentally wrong is society's collective refusal to create a literature from its languages, thereby depriving the world of the building blocks necessary to build the edifice of world literature.
Certainly, a national literature is not made up only of literature composed in the nation’s mother tongue. Translating the national experience into another language also builds up a national literature. The literature of migration and of exile also contributes to the enrichment of both national and world literature. How would one fully explain vodou in another's language? Or the Haitian lakou and konbit traditions in a language which is, after all, foreign? So far, I have been unable to do this myself. On the other hand, using and promoting the mother tongue in order to develop a national literature does not preclude the use of other languages. It all comes down to demonstrating that from the clash of cultures there can emerge beauty and light.

Each of us, alienated or not, helps make up the world as it is

The collective refusal, by writers in numerous countries, to write in their mother tongue has produced numerous problems. Many today slave away in search of their solutions. As a general rule, it is easier to follow the well-trodden path than it is to seek one's own way. It is much easier to follow fashion than it is to build up and promote one's own style. For many of us, it may be easier to become a great writer by writing in another’s language.

Major literary prizes, like the Nobel or the Goncourt, have enormous prestige, but they are the product of Western thought and vision. However, nothing prevents any other continent, country, or organization from establishing other notable prizes, residencies or literary opportunities. Perhaps it would require too much time and too many resources for some countries, including my own, to provide an alternative to the grand prizes, particularly if the new prizes, too, could be snatched away by Westerners. Should we worry, then, about a one-way world literature?

We should also mention the Internet, which is so omnipresent that it has ushered forward a new phase of globalization. The International Data Corporation (IDC) performed a study regarding the relative presence of languages in internet interchanges. An IDC analyst, Steve McLure, concludes that “the shift between a strong support for ‘universal English’ and the lack of interest in other languages would be dramatic.” According to the study, the preferred language of 27,000 survey subjects around the world was English, followed by Japanese, German, Spanish and French.

Thus, this space that should serve as a forum for equal exchange and debate, too often turns into a one-way conversation. So, we ask, given the space consumed by these few languages, who is doing the speaking? And who is listening? Would it not be worthwhile, in Haiti for example, to push for the increased presence of Haitian Creole in these conversations? We must not forget that each language carries an ideology, a vision of the world.

I hope these scattered reflections lead us to reflect more on how we participate in the development of a world literature. World literature is always shifting and moving, sometimes in a single direction, sometimes in several directions at once. At the same time, I am aware that the debate over language
will never be finished. Do we speak of world literature in the singular or the plural? Does it matter? What matters most is what the phrase “world literature” refers to. Even if expressed in the plural, it may still refer to only a single literature. It could also just as easily be singular and yet result in diverse literatures. The most important thing is how one holds oneself before others, remaining open, but without losing one's identity, one's essence.

I remember a tale I read as a child. I do not recall the entire story; but what I remember quite well is that it was about a kingdom in which a king and queen had a daughter. Through an unfortunate accident, the princess lost all of her front teeth. She was unhappy because of her loss, and could not stand that the other little girls, mere subjects, still possessed of all their teeth. The princess did not need to brood over her fate for very long, because the other little girls did not wait long before pulling out their own teeth, for toothlessness had come to be regarded as “in fashion.” The subjects were unaware that the princess had lost her teeth by accident. They felt, quite simply, that if it was good enough for royalty, it was good enough for them.

When thinking of questions of globalization, or world literature as defined by the West and others, I cannot keep from thinking back on this story. I hope, all the while, that we writers from “other countries” avoid serving as puppets the way these unfortunate subjects did.

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