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Emily Eells

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Foreign Words in Victorian and Edwardian Literature

Emprunts et empreintes de la langue étrangère dans la littérature victorienne et édouardienne

Emily Eells

- 1 The articles in this issue of *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens* are part of a larger project entitled ‘*Les mots étrangers/The Words of Others*’ undertaken by my research group *Confluences* (CREA - Centre de recherches anglophones) at the University of Paris-Ouest. We are engaged in a study of the use of foreign words in works written in English, with a particular interest in the motives which prompt an author to opt for a foreign word rather than its English equivalent and the impact which such foreign intrusion has on the text. The first phase of our work, published in autumn 2013 under the title *L’Étranger dans la langue* (eds Emily Eells, Christine Berthin and Jean-Michel Déprats, Presses de l’Université de Paris-Ouest), also broached the question of translating texts encrusted with foreign words. The title of this issue of *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens—Emprunts et empreintes de la langue étrangère dans la littérature victorienne et édouardienne*—provides an eloquent example of how the specific possibilities of one language empower it to say more than another. The paronomasia of the paired terms ‘emprunts et empreintes’ would indeed be a challenge to translate into English: to begin with, the French word ‘emprunt’ expresses a dual perspective of the same transaction which English clarifies more sharply by using two distinct phrasal verbs pointing in opposite directions ‘to borrow from’ and ‘to loan to’. The loan words are then imprinted, or ‘empreintes’, into the English text in a process of inscription which becomes the text’s defining feature, or fingerprint. Giving a name to that process is equally challenging: the various French terms suggested by Danielle Perrot-Corpet in her introduction to *Citer la langue de l’autre—pérégrinisme—ou xénisme, ou étrangisme* (Perrot-Corpet 11)—as well as their English counterparts ‘peregrinations, xenisms and foreignisms’ fall short of the mark. It is true that they all use the suffix ‘-isme’ used to denote a peculiarity or characteristic in language (as in the terms Americanism or Gallicism), but terms ending in ‘ism’ or ‘isme’ are too loose and

heavy to pinpoint the foreign word incised with finely wrought precision in a text. The Greek for 'foreign' (xeno-) is used in compound forms and uncomfortably anticipates coupling with 'phobia', giving 'xenism' a distasteful resonance. 'Pérégrinisme' or the English word 'peregrinations' might be more pertinent as it suggests the dynamics of foreign words circulating in a piece, but the etymological root that 'peregrine' shares with 'pilgrim' introduces the misleading notion that using foreign words follows a particular agenda. The process we are concerned with is aesthetic, and is perhaps best described using Le Fanu's term in *Uncle Silas* 'that pretty tessellation of foreign idiom'. (Le Fanu 54) The foreign word is the 'tessera', not in Harold Bloom's sense of a completion or antithesis, but in the sense of a token, a distinguishing sign or watchword. The foreign word also fits the definition of tessera meaning a small piece of marble or glass used in a mosaic pavement. Writing the foreign into a text can be compared to tessellating, in the sense that the author constructs a text made up of different languages which form a variously coloured pattern. Tessellation means introducing a foreign word which renders the meaning more incisively and more suggestively than the available English synonym. It adds relief and variety to the text, triggering a verbal pyrotechnics of *son et lumière*.

- 2 The following articles on 'tessellation of foreign idiom' in Victorian and Edwardian literature were prefaced with a discussion of Hardy's use of a French phrase in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886).¹ In the startling opening chapter of that novel, the drunken male protagonist Michael Henchard auctions off his wife Susan and daughter Elizabeth-Jane in a scene of arrestingly cold inhumanity. The isolated example of French punctuating the text comes 18 years—and nine chapters—later: Henchard is now mayor and Susan has returned to Casterbridge with her daughter Elizabeth-Jane whom she sends to inform Henchard that they are in town. At this stage, Elizabeth-Jane knows nothing of her family history and can neither anticipate nor fathom the effect her announcement will have on Henchard:

Elizabeth-Jane now entered, and stood before the master of the premises. His dark pupils—which always seemed to have a red spark of light in them, though this could hardly be a physical fact—turned indifferently round under his dark brows until they rested on her figure. 'Now then, what is it, my young woman?' he said blandly.

'Can I speak to you—not on business, sir?' said she.

'Yes—I suppose'. He looked at her more thoughtfully.

'I am sent to tell you, sir', she innocently went on, 'that a distant relative of yours by marriage, Susan Newson, a sailor's widow, is in the town, and to ask whether you would wish to see her'.

The rich *rouge-et-noir* of his countenance underwent a slight change. 'Oh—Susan is—still alive?' he asked with difficulty.

'Yes, sir'.

'Are you her daughter?'

'Yes, sir—her only daughter'. (Hardy, 92. My emphasis)

- 3 The way Henchard stammers over the question 'Susan is . . . still alive?' expresses his struggle to contain the shock provoked by Elizabeth-Jane's news. There is also a jolt in the narrator's speech as the foreign words 'rouge-et-noir' erupt into the text visually through the use of italics. As Hardy had used 'dark' and 'red' to describe Henchard's eyes a few lines earlier, he may simply have substituted their French equivalents to describe his ruddy, swarthy countenance or face. However, the intrusion of the highlighted French words endows them with greater significance than their English equivalents. Hardy's use of French to describe Henchard's facial expression makes *rouge et noir* into a metaphor for his hot-blooded anger and violence. In his monograph *Victorian Hauntings*, Julian

Wolfreys even identifies the phrase as an allusion to Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le Noir* (Wolfreys 122), which heightens the impassioned resonance of the description. It is equally possible that Hardy is referring to the card-game known in English as rouge-et-noir, thus associating Henchard with gambling as the players put their stakes on red and black diamond-shaped spots marked on the gaming table. The card-game 'rouge-et-noir' is also a type of solitaire, which could point to the numerous years Henchard had lived in abstinence and on his own. At the same time, Hardy may have used a French phrase as a way of subtly pointing to Henchard's illicit love affair with Lucetta in Jersey where 'they speak French on one side of the street and English on the other, and a mixed tongue in the middle of the road' (Hardy 206).

- 4 Though we can only conjecture what Hardy might have intended when he grafted the paired French words onto his text, their effect is volcanic and defies circumscription. They strike a foreign note within the well-defined confines of Hardy's Wessex and offer a glimpse of the intermediary linguistic space of the Channel island of Jersey where English and French mingle. Thus the French phrase 'rouge-et-noir' resonates in Hardy's text with more significance than the simple face value of the words (red and black), illustrating Adorno's points on the use of 'words from abroad':

Foreign words become the bearers of subjective contents: of the nuances. The meanings in one's own language may well correspond to the meanings of the foreign words in every case; but they cannot be arbitrarily replaced by them because the expression of subjectivity cannot simply be dissolved in meaning. Mood, atmosphere, the music of language, all the postulates of Verlaine's *art poétique* on which the differential principle of nuance is based, tend to harden the individual's claim to his rational indissolubility in language in that they demonstrate this claim through their untranslatability. (Adorno 287)

- 5 The focal point of the articles which follow is precisely the poetics of the foreign word as defined by Adorno. The contributions range across a significant variety of genres and authorial styles. They include studies of Gothic literature haunted by the words of others, the historical novel set abroad, the freedom of speech the foreign word brings to the woman writer, the return to the classics in Aesthetic writings and Decadent poetry, the urbanity and eloquence of the cosmopolitan, and the exoticism of the colonial. This collection of articles offers multiple perspectives on the question of foreign words in literary texts, from a close-up of the individual tessera to a wide-angle view embracing tessellation at work.

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NOTES

1. The contributors met for a two-day conference at the University of Paris-Ouest at Nanterre in early February 2012. We began with a close reading of the passage from Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* presented here.

INDEX

Mots-clés: mots étrangers, pérégrinisme, xénisme, tessellation, Hardy (Thomas), Maire de Casterbridge, Adorno (Theodor)

Keywords: words of others, peregrination, xenism, Mayor of Casterbridge

AUTHOR

EMILY EELLS

Emily Eells is Professor of British literature at the University of Paris at Nanterre. She is a specialist of 19th century British art and literature, and author of *Proust's Cup of Tea: Homoeroticism and Victorian Culture* (published by Ashgate in 2002). She is now working on Oscar Wilde's use of French, and questions related to the use of foreign languages in English texts more generally. She is head of the research group 'Confluences : les mots étrangers/The Words of Others' (CREA, Université de Paris Ouest) and co-edited with Christine Berthin and Jean-Michel Déprats the first volume of articles produced by that group, entitled *L'Étranger dans la langue* (Presses de l'Université de Paris Ouest, 2013).

Emily Eells est professeur d'anglais à l'Université de Paris Ouest Nanterre La Défense et spécialiste de la littérature et de l'art britanniques du XIX^e siècle. Auteur de Proust's Cup of Tea: Homoeroticism and Victorian Culture (publié par Ashgate en 2002), elle travaille actuellement sur Oscar Wilde et la France, et s'intéresse tout particulièrement aux questions de 'l'interlinguistique', c'est-à-dire l'empreinte d'une langue étrangère dans un texte d'une autre langue. Elle dirige le groupe de recherches 'Confluences : les mots étrangers' (CREA, Université de Paris Ouest) et a co-édité avec Christine Berthin et Jean-Michel Déprats le premier recueil des travaux de ce groupe intitulé L'Étranger dans la langue (Presses de l'Université de Paris Ouest, 2013).