

THIRTY-FOUR YEARS IN FRENCH STUDIES—REMINISCENCES AND REFLECTIONS

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It is a pleasure to be back in Victoria after eighteen years, and I am honoured to be asked to address an association of which I have been a member, albeit an absentee member, for many years, almost since its inception.

Those who know me are aware that I normally prefer to talk about policies, ideas, issues, rather than personalities, let alone myself—today is therefore an exception. This talk is my very first attempt at the autobiographical genre. As I wrote up my notes, I found them to turn more and more personal. For this I apologize. I suppose the genre implies subjectivity: so I will be subjective, and, given the format of the talk, I will also be selective. Don't be surprised if I don't attempt to cover the history of French studies in this country since the mid-fifties.

I was very fortunate to have reached the shores of Australia (and even more fortunate to have joined the Australian university system, which at the time was not yet "unified"...) at the dawn of its greatest expansion.

Having left my native Budapest in 1947, I spent the following nine years in Brussels and Strasbourg, both future would-be capitals of Europe, with shorter periods of residence in Paris. You will not be surprised that of the three French-speaking cities Paris has left the most lasting impression on me, and when I get on a plane, it invariably lands in Paris.

I defended my doctoral thesis in Strasbourg in March 1956 and by June I was in Australia. A non-assisted migrant, I paid for my passage and disembarked in Melbourne just a few weeks after the Olympic Games. But Melbourne only marked the end of the sea travel: a Pioneer bus took me to Sydney on the Hume. Twenty miles north of Melbourne I saw a kangaroo cross the highway: I thought it was a normal occurrence, but in my following 37 years in Australia I never saw anything like it again, at least on the Hume.

It took me four months to get a tenurable academic job in Australia: in a similar situation today it would no doubt take someone with equivalent qualifications four years just to be noticed, let alone be appointed to a lectureship. It was a lucky country for me...

During those four months of waiting (or rather, at the time, of uncertainty and anguish—waiting implies a retrospective point of view) I worked as a filing clerk in the Taxation Department in Martin Place, putting files back in their place on the appropriate shelves, hopefully... This was the most soul-destroying occupation I ever experienced, the deepest boredom I ever suffered: for the first time I knew what it meant to be watching the clock all day, desperately waiting for the tea-break, the lunch-break, the time to "knock off". Most of the filing clerks were people between two jobs, many of them interesting and talented individuals—the worst were the bosses who were permanent employees having reached the nadir of their careers as filing supervisors.

The Martin Place experience taught me to understand those millions of people in the world who were in occupations similar to mine in the Taxation Department and whose perception of time was so different from the one I knew before Martin Place and after Martin Place. Before Martin Place and after Martin Place time was always too short, whilst in Martin Place it was interminable. This experience made me appreciate every moment of my professional life as a university scholar during those 34 years, and beyond. My work was my hobby, and I was paid to do something that I would have paid to be allowed to do. It was a rather wonderful life. In that broader context even the Dawkins years were pretty good.

A few years before coming to Australia I read Proust, for pleasure. I decided I wanted to read something on Proust, and borrowed a book in the Strasbourg University Library on his work. Its author happened to be a Léon Tauman, Reader in French at the University of Western Australia. I wrote to Tauman and asked him what topic or what author I should choose for my doctoral thesis, in the light of my planned career in Australia. Tauman wrote back promptly, telling me (not uncharacteristically, as I later discovered) that all that mattered was that I should work on an author I loved. I didn't follow his advice—I decided to work on a topic that intrigued me, which was quite different.

Tauman was one of those lyrical critics who would enthuse over the texts he taught. One of his students, now a senior academic, later told

me of his seminars where he would read a text, look at his audience in a meaningful manner and then exclaim: "Que c'est beau!". And then read another passage.

I don't wish to underestimate the importance of reading. I believe one of Ian Maxwell's great strengths as Professor of English in the University of Melbourne was his superb talent as a reader of poetry. Colleagues and students, including those not enrolled for his course, would flock to the lecture theatre just to hear him read poetry. I believe Jim Lawler who is now Professor of French in the University of Chicago and whom we have recently seen and indeed heard in Melbourne on the occasion of the French Studies Conference at the Monash City Centre, was also a most charismatic reader of French poetry. If the legend is true, female students were known to swoon at his feet in one of the Old Arts lecture theatres at Melbourne when he read Mallarmé or Baudelaire or Verlaine to the class.

My own career as a literary scholar was at least partly motivated by an experience of reading aloud. In 1947 or 1948, soon after arriving in Belgium I attended the final year of a good secondary school in Brussels, the Athénée d'Uccle. Our French teacher, Maurice Rasquin, came in one morning to read to us the opening lines of Racine's biblical drama, *Athalie*:

Oui, je viens dans son temple adorer l'Eternel...

As he read the lines, his voice trembled and he had tears in his eyes. I decided that morning that until I knew why those lines of *Athalie* moved Maurice Rasquin to tears, I would not fully understand the spirit of the French language, the essence of French literature. Of all my years in various schools in Hungary and now in Belgium that moment stood out as the most significant and the most memorable. I never forgot Maurice Rasquin whilst I can hardly remember the names of my other teachers, with one or two possible exceptions. When in the 'sixties I began to publish on Racine, I was distressed that the man who started me on that track almost twenty years earlier didn't know of the profound influence he had had on me. He probably wouldn't even remember me. I eventually tracked him down in his retirement, and wrote to him to tell him my story and express my gratitude, sending him the appropriate offprints with the appropriate dedications. He responded as promptly as anyone

could before the wonderful days of fax and electronic mail. It was obvious that he was moved by my letter. This anecdote illustrates the power and influence teachers can have on our lives, often unknown to them, and one wonders how many of us chose a career not because it suited us but because of the influence of an inspirational teacher.

During those profoundly depressing days in the Taxation Department, encouraged by my epistolary success with Léon Tauman, I decided to write to all the Professors and Heads of French Departments in Australian universities—there were some eight of them at the time—to offer my services. Of the eight only one replied. His name was A. R. Chisholm. The letter was negative—"Chis" was about to retire after 35 years as Head of French at Melbourne—but it was characteristically warm and encouraging. Some of the other eight Professors or Heads later became friends. One of them, Ron Jackson, Chisholm's successor in the Chair at Melbourne, was my mentor during the most crucial years of my career. I sometimes wondered whether his marvellous support, his exceptional generosity to me were not motivated by a wish to be forgiven for not answering my letter in 1956... But undoubtedly Ron was a man of great integrity and I prefer to assume that he would not have supported me if he didn't think it was appropriate.

As far as I was concerned, I decided that in the very unlikely event of my reaching a position of responsibility (I certainly didn't dream of anything as exalted as a Chair), I would always answer all letters, even if it was to say that I was unable to help. And I think I did manage to keep that promise made to myself in 1956, during the long period of my departmental headship in three major universities.

Although being appointed to the Monash Chair in 1967 was an immensely exciting challenge and being appointed to the McCaughey Chair of French at Sydney in 1975 was an extraordinary honour which I have never ceased to appreciate and relish—the work I have done on the history of French studies in Australia's oldest university and the interest I have taken in the first holder of the Chair, G. G. Nicholson, are an expression of my awareness of that honour—nothing ever overshadowed my joy at being offered my first academic appointment at Newcastle University College in the second half of 1956. At the time I felt there was nothing I wanted more than a lectureship in French and there would be nothing more I would ever want after that. In a sense that has remained true throughout my career. At the risk of being immodest,

I will say that the only real hurdle was getting that job in Newcastle, and it meant to me more than everything else I was to achieve later in life. It is the only job I genuinely applied for: all my later appointments were, if not by invitation, at least by invitation to apply. I more or less knew that those jobs were mine if I wanted them: no doubt I wanted them, but certainly not as much as the lectureship at Newcastle. And if I had not got them, it wouldn't have really mattered. I sometimes think that my comparative success as a reasonably collegial head of department was due to this lack of real ambition, to the fact that I never really sought power, and that when I was given it, I exercised it almost reluctantly, certainly not eagerly or with possessive passion. Newcastle truly mattered: my subsequent appointments somehow came by themselves.

There are two people who were closely associated with my progress in the profession. I have already mentioned Ron Jackson who appointed me to the French Department in Melbourne in 1961 and who generously supported me for the Monash Chair and later for the Sydney Chair. I owe him more than anyone else, not only career-wise, but also as someone whose example taught me what academic values and personal and intellectual integrity were. The other was Roger Laufer. A mutual Paris friend had recommended me to Roger when I first arrived in Sydney in 1956. Roger Laufer was French *lecteur* at the University of Sydney at that stage—he could not help me at Sydney where my language background made me *persona non grata* at the time, but he drew my attention to the Newcastle vacancy which he rightly judged was within my reach. Ron Jackson took Roger Laufer with him to Melbourne a few months later and was no doubt instrumental in Roger getting the Monash Chair in 1961. He then appointed me to a Senior Lectureship in Melbourne to succeed Roger. Six years later Roger decided to return to France, and I again succeeded him, this time at Monash. Our paths didn't cross again, except that in a sense by taking up the Sydney appointment, I returned to the venue of the beginnings of Roger Laufer's Australian career.

As I said earlier, I was very fortunate to have come to Australia at the right time, when the country's tremendous post-war expansion got underway. This expansion also included the growth of the universities under the man to whom they owe so much—I mean Robert Menzies, who probably deserves to be remembered by history for that growth alone, representing as it does his greatest achievement.

Migrants like to tell stories of rejection and discrimination. I will do the politically incorrect thing by saying that I was surprised by the tolerance that was extended to me from the outset, in the mid-fifties. I experienced tolerance and sometimes acceptance. It is of course possible that my status as an academic and my French connection put me in a privileged position in this regard, and that I was not seen as a migrant by many. But beyond my personal experience, having observed the process of integration that has taken place in Australia between the 'fifties and the 'nineties I am struck by the Anglo-Celtic majority's ability first to tolerate and then gradually accept others and their beliefs and lifestyles. Resistance and rejection are sociologically understandable and unavoidable, but they were and they are milder than they would have been in similar circumstances in any part of the world I know. The change to a multicultural society has taken place comparatively harmoniously. There is far more racism, far more prejudice within the ethnic minorities, especially those most vocal against discrimination, than amongst the majority. And in the rare cases where violence has erupted in this country, it has opposed rival ethnic groups. All this is not meant to vindicate complacency in the struggle against intolerance but it is, I think, a fair statement of the truth of racial and ethnic relations in Australia as I perceive them.

I have said that being a French scholar, even though not a French national, was decidedly an advantage. I have always been intrigued by the curious love-hate relationship Australians entertain with the French. Paul Keating's recent remarks on France's moral debt to Australia was a good example of this. But even when French-Australian relations were at their lowest ebb, during the nuclear tests in the Pacific and the New-Caledonian crisis, university enrolments in French remained unaffected, contrary for instance, to the effects of the Tiananmen Square repression on Chinese studies in this country. The Sydney Alliance Française recently conducted a market research survey on attitudes to France in advertising. They found that things French continue to carry great prestige in the eyes of the general public, otherwise advertisers on TV and in the printed media would not portray so many genuine or phoney French characters, names or scenery.

During my long period of association with French studies in this country we have moved from a time when the place of French in education was taken for granted, no doubt on the British model, to a

situation where we have to justify the choice of French. It was probably good for us to be subject to real competition. I have always believed that we should support the cause of languages in general, never attack any other language and always be positive. In the long run French will survive and retain a good "market share", as they say, possibly the best...

Perhaps the greatest change we have experienced in French studies over the last two decades is the diversification of syllabi. We have learnt to adapt to an increasing variety of admission levels and learning needs: beginners, intermediate level entrants, post-VCE or HSC students and native speakers or other advanced-level learners. The traditional language-literature model has also been challenged and the cultural component of our courses now comprises linguistics, film study, popular culture, Francophone studies, French history and society, etc. I have shown elsewhere that the language-literature model only emerged in the 20th century—there is nothing sacred about it. French syllabi a century ago combined language study with philology or historical linguistics: so the changes we are experiencing now are, in a sense, a return to earlier patterns.

Looking back on the 34 years I spent in French Departments in Australia together with this 35th year (i.e. 1993, my year as Head of the School of Languages in the University of Melbourne), I must confess that what I found most exciting, most exhilarating, was the dynamics of change. Whilst I also enjoyed the steady-state periods, the periods of consolidation and maintenance, such as my years at the University of Melbourne in the 'sixties, or the University of Sydney in the 'seventies and the 'eighties, i.e. sound academic environments in which I met some marvellous people and appreciated their support and friendship, the highlights, the really stimulating periods were the periods of change—Newcastle, Monash, some of my Sydney experience (the islands of reform in the midst of a sea of conservatism in a generally static University), and last but certainly not least the University of Melbourne revisited. Newcastle and Monash were establishing themselves: the periods I served there were periods of construction, creation: we were building a new and young institution. Paradoxically I find the same spirit of change and renewal in the Melbourne of 1994: the University is again on the move, it is going somewhere, it has a direction, it has regained its lost youth. Change is taking place with a sense of urgency, as if time

were against us. During my ten and half months here I cannot remember a dull week, a week without new ideas, new initiatives, new enthusiasms. It is a marvellous note on which to end: I have done a Melba once, I don't think I will do another one, but undoubtedly Melbourne Mark II has proved to be a splendid epilogue to what has been a "lucky" life.

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