

TRANSCULTURALISM AND HYBRIDITY IN THE FRENCH-AUSTRALIAN WRITER PAUL WENZ

Dr Maurice Blackman, University of New South Wales

Paul Wenz was born in 1869 in Reims, the third of five children. His father was a wealthy wool-buyer who had emigrated to France from Germany, and the family company had agencies in Australia and Argentina. Paul was educated at a private school in Paris, where his close friends included Joseph Krug, of the famous champagne family, and André Gide. After his period of military service, he was sent on a world tour as part of his initiation into the family business. He arrived in Australia in October 1892. He seems to have liked the country immediately, and he spent the next three years jackerooing in Victoria, NSW and Queensland. He also managed to visit New Caledonia and various Pacific islands, and spent several months jackerooing in New Zealand before returning to France at the beginning of 1897.

On his return, he announced to his family his decision to settle permanently in Australia as a grazier and immediately began making arrangements to emigrate. It was perhaps on the boat bringing him back to Australia in 1897 that he met a young woman of his own age, Harriet Dunne, daughter of a wealthy grazier who had a vast property in far western New South Wales, and fell in love. On his return, he took up a station called Nanima on the banks of the Lachlan, between Forbes and Cowra, in some of the best sheep-raising country in New South Wales. He had a large residence built, and married Harriet ("Hettie") Dunne in September 1898.

With Hettie's help, Wenz prospered as a grazier and made many improvements to Nanima, but he already had other ambitions: he began writing short stories, and from 1900 on he published in various French periodicals a number of stories set in Australia and bringing to life for a French public the typical characters of the bush. Wenz was very impressed with the hardy nature and stoic humour of Australian rural types, and also with the independent spirit of the new Australian federation. He respected the harshness and strange beauty of the bush, and appreciated the experience of bush life.

His first stories found a receptive audience in France, and in 1905 Wenz published a collection of 16 stories entitled *A l'autre bout du monde* under the pen-name "Paul Warrego". In 1908, Wenz published in Melbourne, again under the name of "Paul Warrego", his only book written in English, *Diary of a New Chum*. In 1910 a second collection of short stories, *Sous la Croix du Sud*, appeared in France, this time under the name Paul Wenz.

Wenz and his wife loved to travel, and they made regular trips back to France every three years or so to visit his family. They found themselves in France at the outbreak of war in 1914 and decided to stay on. Wenz became a liaison officer in the Franco-British military hospital and Hettie worked for the Red Cross. After Australian troops were sent to France in 1916, Wenz was transferred to London as a liaison officer with the Red Cross and had regular contact with Australian personnel. During the war Wenz published several stories in France based on these experiences, and in 1919 he published in Paris a novel about Australian soldiers on leave in England. He also made the acquaintance of several leading English writers — Joseph Conrad, Arnold Bennett, and John Galsworthy.

The Wenzes returned to Australia in September 1919 after an absence of more than six years, and Wenz resumed his life as a grazier with some gusto. He seems to have identified himself more with Australia after the war, and increasingly sought acceptance as an Australian writer, even though he continued to write in French. Between 1919 and 1931 he published four novels, all of them with Australian settings: *Au pays de leurs pères*, *L'Homme du soleil couchant*, *Le Jardin des Coraux*, and *L'Echarde*. He also published in this period a small book about sheep-raising and a book of fanciful memoirs, *Il était une fois un gosse*.

Wenz and his wife made several more trips to France during the 1920s and 30s, and it was on his return from one such trip in 1939 that he fell ill with pneumonia and died from complications at the age of 70. Paul and Hettie had no children; she stayed on at Nanima until 1948, when she retired to Manly, and subsequently died there in 1959.

Paul Wenz, writer

Wenz's literary career seems to have been that of a successful amateur writer. He remained virtually unknown in Australia because of the language he chose to write in, and he had a minor success in France with his pre-war stories, no doubt because of their exotic locations. He is a good storyteller with the right mix of wry humour and sentiment, and he is the first, and so

far the only, writer to give the French reader a true picture of Australian bush life.

In his bush stories he usually adopts the point of view of a bemused new chum poking gentle fun at the ways of the bush types. His stories are peopled with character sketches of swaggies, boundary riders, solitary miners, bush pub-keepers, shearers and rural workers, station bosses and store-keepers, and the stories range from the lightly humorous to the poignant to the starkly horrific. The central character in both *Diary of a New Chum* and *L'Homme du soleil couchant* is an upper-class refugee new chum from England fleeing an unhappy or unwise love affair.

As a first novel, *L'Homme du soleil couchant* is interesting from both a formal and thematic point of view. Like the intermediary work which preceded it, *Diary of a New Chum*, it is an episodic narrative. Both tales start with an initial rupture between the sophisticated world of London and the rougher environment of Australia, and both follow a kind of initiatory process during which the exiled hero finds a new life. The central character in both tales is a transplanted outsider, which reflects the situation of the author himself. In the *Diary*, Wenz plays on the comic possibilities of the “double perspective” of the immigrant narrator, whereas the sundowner figure in the novel lives out his exile as a more painful series of trials. Thematically, the process of redemption of the central figure in the novel is paralleled with the opening up and development of the bush, and the novel becomes a sort of saga of the growth of a new settlement in a developing Australia.

Au pays de leurs pères is Wenz's second novel; composed during the war, it recounts the adventures of a group of Australian soldiers in a British military hospital and on leave in England. Wenz reverses in this novel the perspective of his two previous works so as to present the reactions of transplanted Australians in an English environment.

Wenz's last two novels are more ambitious and show some rather interesting “gothic” elements. *Le Jardin des Coraux* starts off in Sydney and then moves to an island on the Great Barrier Reef, where the central characters, a pair of young newlyweds, go for their honeymoon. Their idyll is transformed into terror and then tragedy when an escaped convict from New Caledonia turns up on the island. Tension builds until the young husband is killed by the escapee, who then terrorizes the young woman. She waits for her moment and finally kills him in his sleep. But then she has to remain alone on the isolated island with the two dead men until the monthly supply-boat arrives. *L'Echarde* is the story of a woman's obsessive jealousy

for a man she cannot have. She spends her life looking for ways to make his life miserable, and finally, by an ironic twist of fate, she dies in an accident which she herself had arranged. The structure of these two novels is more strongly dramatic, and their psychological dimension makes them more interesting than the earlier works.

Paul Wenz, a “French-Australian”

Looking back on Wenz’s writings up to the end of World War I, we could say that Wenz seems to see himself as an interpreter and apologist for the Australian way of life to the French public. The point of view typical of the texts of this period seems to be, essentially, that of an understanding outsider. Wenz accepts Australian values, particularly the bush values, and tries to communicate them to the French.

However, his experience of the war in Europe, and his prolonged absence from Australia at this time, seem to represent a turning point in Wenz’s identity. His post-war writings are more pessimistic, in a sense, but the implicit point of view is less that of an outsider: the central figures are now more like internal exiles than transplanted foreigners, and the “Australianness” of the text is a given, rather than something to be explained.

This shift of identity raises the question of where to locate Paul Wenz as a writer. On the one hand, it is clear that Wenz identified with the French literary scene: he read widely and regularly in contemporary French literature and maintained a library of the great writers; he kept up a correspondence with André Gide during his life in Australia, often discussing literary matters; and he maintained other literary contacts on his regular visits to France. In a number of respects, his writing is identifiably French, as we would expect. The most obvious French influence is Guy de Maupassant, and through him, the whole “naturalist” movement in late 19th century French writing. There are distinct affinities in both style and form between Maupassant’s stories and those of Wenz, particularly in his pre-war short stories: their concise, clear-cut form; the clarity and austerity of their style; and their pervading irony. Wenz’s later novels also suggest traces of Gide, though without his metaphysical complexity.

But alongside the French and international influences in Wenz’s writing, it is, if anything, easier to detect the Australian influences. Wenz appreciated the poetry of Gordon and the bush balladists, like the rest of his class, and was a regular reader of *The Bulletin*. As a writer, he greatly admired the stories of Henry Lawson, and recommended him to Gide; his own bush

stories show that he was certainly influenced by the new *Bulletin* school of writing that was at its peak in the period 1890-1914.

It is clear that, at the very least, we can consider Paul Wenz as an Australian-identified French writer, or better, as a French-Australian writer: it is this “transcultural” position which gives his writing an extra layer of interest. Paul Wenz is a writer who is neither truly French nor truly Australian: the place from which he speaks is doubly eccentric, both in its relation to the metropolitan mother culture and to the adopted culture. The fact that he wrote in French and maintained his French ties, coupled with the transplanted European perspective which is foregrounded at least in the first period of his writing, sets him apart from the post-colonial *Bulletin* writers he admired: Wenz may be celebrating the post-colonial Australian identity, but he is addressing himself to a metropolitan audience that is ultimately on the side of the colonizers. And yet, I would not want to claim that whatever traces of post-colonial discourse we may discern in Wenz have merely been appropriated by him: surely his very espousal of bush values — together with his initial use of the pen-name “Paul Warrego” — is itself a way of repositioning himself radically in relation to French culture?

Wenz’s transcultural position can be seen in both the content and the *écriture* of his texts: his point of view is not that of a Frenchman, specifically, but of someone who is simultaneously at home in the bush and yet “alien”. Almost always, in the pre-war texts, the narrator or central figure is an immigrant, a “new chum”, or else a swagman or some other marginal figure who lives on the edge of the dominant culture. There are also some texts which present an encounter between two cultures in an uneasy relationship: for example, there is a very interesting story called *Picky*, which is about a young Aboriginal girl living on a cattle station and which is presented from her point of view, and there are also several Pacific island tales based on this uneasy relationship. In short, the typical situation and point of view in Wenz is rooted in a position of otherness. To the French reader, Wenz thus communicates not just the idea of a foreign culture, but also the experience of otherness, in a familiar-seeming language. To the Australian reader who can read his foreign language, he communicates a familiar-seeming life and culture, but it has been rendered “other” both by the point of view and by the linguistic filter of French.

This is a more complex question, but I would further suggest that this transcultural position can also be seen to affect the very language of the writing. Wenz writes in French, but the language shows signs of becoming transplanted, alienated, adapted to the new cultural space. Obviously, Wenz’s French text will have to incorporate a number of local words and

names, and the semantic field of many French words will have to expand to take account of specifically Australian meanings: the French language will have to adapt itself in order to express the geographic and cultural specificity of the new referential space. But Wenz's writing also demonstrates a number of conscious strategies to transplant the French language into the Australian space. And interestingly, he seems also to have had some inkling of the more subtle alienating effects that his language was undergoing: in one of his letters to Gide, for instance, he writes: "Je me demande si mon français ne sent pas terriblement l'eucalyptus ou la menthe, ou les deux!"

Ce matin-là, les hommes, après avoir reçu comme à l'ordinaire les instructions de Scott, le « boss » de Yangowirra, partirent à cheval chacun de son côté, sous un soleil qui promettait déjà de pousser le mercure du thermomètre Fahrenheit à la centaine.

Bill, le berger, allait changer les bédons du paddock et les conduire sur la rivière; depuis deux semaines, les pauvres bêtes vivaient de graterons et buvaient la boue liquide de la Parrot Creek. Son chien Tim, qui valait quatre hommes derrière un troupeau, le suivait de près marchant toujours à l'ombre du cheval.

Sandy et Jack se dirigeaient sur Bald Hill, une colline qu'on apercevait à l'Est, pour voir comment le bétail supportait la sécheresse, qui cette année en avait tué huit millions en Australie. L'été dernier, c'était une bande magnifique de cinq cents durhams rouges. Maintenant, comme disait Sandy, la peau leur était trop grande, ne leur allait plus.

Harry, son winchester sur la cuisse, partait avec des airs de « bushranger »¹ à l'assaut des hauteurs boisées, dont les rocs escarpés se découpaient bleus dans le lointain. Un mois auparavant, on avait compté quarante-trois brebis dénichées par les « dingoes ». Harry espérait tuer un ou deux de ces vermines: le « scalp », les oreilles et la queue réunies par la bande du dos, valait 3 livres sterling maintenant.

Ces hommes étaient tous Australiens, bons travailleurs, mais grands enfants qui, malgré la livre qu'ils gagnaient chaque semaine, avaient rarement un penny à leur crédit; car du même coeur ils mettaient leurs shillings sur la table du poker ou dans le chapeau qui circule pour un camarade malheureux, estropié par un accident.

Fred le « jackaroo »² complétait le personnel de la station. Venu d'une bonne famille d'Adélaïde, dans l'Australie du Sud, et possédant quelque argent à la banque, il avait quitté le collège pour passer plusieurs années à Yangowirra dans la Nouvelle-Galles du Sud, comme apprenti squatter: il pensait plus tard acheter et diriger lui-même une petite station.

1. Bandit qui attaquait les convois d'or et volait les stations à main armée.
2. « Un bleu », un nouveau venu qui apprend le métier sur la station.

(extract from "Fred, scène d'Australie", in *À l'autre bout du monde*, Paris, Librairie Universelle, 1905)

This is an extract from a short story published in 1905 to give some idea of what I mean. You will notice that there are some borrowings from Australian English that have been marked by Wenz, usually only by the use of *guillemets*, but sometimes also given an explanatory note: Wenz refuses to translate or transpose these elements into French terms (examples: « boss », « bushranger », « dingoes », « jackaroo » — only « bushranger » and « jackaroo » have been given explanatory notes). Other borrowings are left unmarked by Wenz — examples: ‘paddock’, ‘squatter’, ‘station’. The reason for this is probably that these terms have become accepted into a regional variety of French through New Caledonian usage (although I am not sure about ‘squatter’). There are also a number of elements that we might call “local colour” or generalized Australian cultural references (place names, ‘thermomètre Fahrenheit’, ‘3 livres sterling’), or references that are culturally specific to Australian bush life (‘la sécheresse’, ‘son winchester sur la cuisse’). Finally, we may note that Wenz’s use of footnotes is sparing and seems to be reserved for specifically Australian cultural references (« bushranger », « jackaroo ») which Wenz feels are important and unlikely to be known to the French reader.

I would suggest in passing that the use of the French signifier ‘le berger’ in the second paragraph could stand as an example of a French word whose semantic field has been implicitly adapted to take account of a specifically Australian reference.

My hypothesis is that Wenz’s increasingly hybridized French no longer signifies “Frenchness”, but expresses his own transculturality. On the one hand, he introduces new Australian signifiers, either by adopting specific Australian words or by creating “loan translations” and, more rarely, neologisms based on Australian words and expressions. These are clearly strategies for expressing “Australianness” or “otherness”. But alongside this strategy, there is a more subtle one at work on the French language used by Wenz. Even where there is little or no apparent modification to the French signifiers he uses, their signified is often reoriented, or even radically reworked, and such reworking is frequently foregrounded in the text.

Probably the most striking example of this is the very title given to the first novel that Wenz wrote, *L’Homme du soleil couchant*. To the French ear, this is a poetic-sounding, but non-transparent appellation, daringly used as a cover title. Behind this title, the Australian will be able to make out the equally poetic, but culturally determined locution, ‘the sundowner’. Having aroused his reader’s poetic curiosity, Wenz will go on to explain in one of the middle chapters of the novel both the linguistic and the cultural meaning of this Frenchified Australian term.

I would suggest that, unlike the first strategy, the effect of this latter strategy is not simply to transpose Australian culture into French, or to treat “Australianness” as some sort of exotic specimen. Its effect is rather to infuse or implant an Australian referentiality into the French language that Wenz uses. Thus modified, the language of Wenz’s writing becomes a means of signifying and expressing his own position of transculturality as a French-Australian writer.

Wenz’s work, then, leaves us with an intriguing paradox. His writing could easily have appeared, at first sight, as a “neo-colonialist” rather than a “post-colonialist” literary enterprise — that is, a potentially patronizing appropriation of the Australian experience into French literary discourse as a sort of latter-day colonial trophy. But on closer inspection, its ultimate effect seems rather to have been the marking out of a position outside the dominant culture and the gradual revelation to Wenz himself of his own position as being *between* two cultures. Even more intriguingly, the attempt to “colonize” Australia with the French language, to incorporate it into the French literary empire, can be seen to have had an unexpected feed-back effect whereby the French language begins to speak “Australian” rather than simply translate Australia into French. At the same time, this almost unique example of transcultural and translinguistic hybridization represents — almost certainly in spite of itself — an early attempt to speak from a position of difference within the hegemony of the “bush nationalist” strain in Australian literary discourse. Paul Wenz’s narratives do not only thematize aspects of the experience of transculturality, but the processes of their *écriture* also have the effect of infusing, one into the other, two hegemonic literary discourses, as well as the two dominant “imperial” languages.

APPENDIX

Paul Wenz — summary bibliography Publications

1900: first short stories published in *L’Illustration* under the name “Paul Warrego”

1905: *A l’autre bout du monde* (“At the Other End of the World”) — first collection of Australian and Pacific stories; published under the name “Paul Warrego”

1908: *Diary of a New Chum* (only text written in English) published in Melbourne under the name “Paul Warrego”

1910: *Sous la Croix du Sud* (“Beneath the Southern Cross”) — second collection of Australian and Pacific stories; first text to show the author’s name as Paul Wenz

1914: translation of Jack London’s *Love of Life* published in Paris

1915: first novel, *L’Homme du soleil couchant* (“The Sundowner”, 1911-1912) serialized in *Revue de Paris*

1919: *Au Pays de leurs pères* (“In the Land of Their Fathers”) - second novel, written 1918, published in Paris

1920-1937 A few stories with European settings published in French journals; some short articles in English published in *Pastoral Review*, *Stock and Station Journal*, *The Bulletin*

1925: *L’élevage du mouton en Australie* (“Sheep-raising in Australia”) published in France

1923: *L’Homme du soleil couchant* - first novel, written before *Au Pays de leurs pères*, published in Paris

1929: *Le Jardin des coraux* (“The Coral Garden”) published in Paris

1930: *Il était une fois un gosse* (“There Was Once a Silly Kid”, fanciful memoirs, probably commenced during the war) published in Paris

1931: *L’Echarde* (“The Thorn in the Flesh”) — last published novel

Manuscripts

- several Chinese stories (1909-10)
- several contemporary European stories (1920-1930)
- a series of stories for children (1925-30?)
- several Arabian fables for children (1929-35)
- *En époussetant la mappemonde* (“Dusting off the Globe”, a collection of travel tales, 1925-35)
- several Australian stories (1930-34)
- *Walkaringa* (an Australian novel, 1937)