

REVIEW

Mémoires d'outre-langue: l'écriture translingue de soi. Par ALAIN AUSONI. Genève: Slatkine, 2018. 198 pp., ill.

In this beautifully written and timely study, originally defended as a doctoral dissertation at the University of Oxford in 2015, Alain Ausoni looks at six writers whose careers developed mainly or even exclusively in French, a language none of them mastered as children in their respective countries of origin but acquired as (young) adults. As such, this book is a neat French-language companion to Mary Besemeres's *Translating One's Self: Language and Selfhood in Cross-Cultural Autobiography* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2002), which focused on writers who similarly adopted English as the medium of their artistic expression: Eva Hoffman, Czesław Miłosz, and Vladimir Nabokov. Writers who transit (or are transported) into an acquired language have been termed 'translingual', a label Ausoni borrows from Steven Kellman after some very welcome fine-tuning. The authors studied are, in order of their appearance: Andreï Makine (whose native language is Russian), Héctor Bianciotti (Argentinian Spanish), Vassilis Alexakis (Greek), Nancy Huston (Canadian English), Ágota Kristóf (Hungarian), and Katalin Molnár (Hungarian). All these men and women (three of each, as it happens) wanted and managed to become creative writers in French, and, for the most part, in France: even Kristóf, who fled her native Hungary for Switzerland, published her work in Paris. As Ausoni is well aware, there is nothing innocent about this 'pacte exclusif avec la nation' (to use a phrase from the much-debated 2007 *Manifeste pour une littérature-monde*). His chapter on Makine, for instance, convincingly shows the latter fashioning himself after other successful Russians such as Henri Troyat (the pen name of Moscow-born Lev Aslanovitch Tarassov) and in particular Romain Gary (born Roman Kacew in Vilnius, then Russian-ruled Lithuania). The fascination with French grandeur that runs through Makine's *Testament français* indeed reminds one of similar obsessions displayed by the narrator's mother in Gary's *Promesse de l'aube*. The fact that both of these novels are also highly and openly autobiographical is no coincidence: like Besemeres, Ausoni detects a 'demande d'autobiographie' (p. 40), a clear connection between life writing and the translingual condition, almost as if writers who move into a new language were pressed (or felt the need) to explain themselves. By privileging such aspects as the choice of genre or the intertextual connections with other translingual writers, Ausoni succeeds in describing a francophonie that is not collective but individual, not the product of linguistic politics and policies (as is the case with much postcolonial or minority writing) but the work of writers whose bilingualism and consequent language choices cannot primarily be ascribed to (and explained by) sociolinguistic factors. Like Leo Spitzer, who similarly (albeit from the quite different vantage point of stylistics) preferred aesthetics as a way of accessing writers' individualities, Ausoni might say, contradicting the old scholastic adage: *individuum non est ineffabile*.

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