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‘Apologies for my English’

In the previous century (in the previous millennium, even!), the second volume of Performance Research presented a collection of ‘Letters from Europe’, only one of which (distinct from the articles which they interleaved) bears the second signature of a translator, from which we may suppose that these letters were written in English. This does not mean, of course, that they were necessarily addressed to the English; to imagine which, as an English reader in England, would be the lure of an enduring imperialism, in which correspondence would offer answers in search of questions rather than the other way round. If, indeed, the ‘past is another country’, this late addition to those European letters from before is written, then, in the mirror of time and place: a letter from the UK today.

Although Europe is not the EU, the EU offers political expression for the ‘European project’ (evoked in his 1997 letter by the indefatigable Dragan Klaic), which might yet prove more effective – for all its manifest problems – without the obstructive politics of British membership. Paradoxically, English may also yet prove more effective as a European language – or, rather, as an EU language – when it is no longer identified with any one of the member states (or, at least, with a national interest, since both Ireland and Malta also have English as an official language). Concerning the future, both of these reflections are deeply depressing, especially now that ‘letters from Europe’ has an air of ‘letters to Britain’, as if the UK were, indeed, separate from Europe.

Sadly, for a certain strain of English politics not being in the EU is a way of implying (or, rather, asserting) that the UK is not part of ‘Europe’; as if being English (distinct, for example, from being Scottish) was impugned by association with a cultural plurality which is itself in search of new modes of identification. This evolving history has, since the late 1990s, been officially oriented by ‘memory wars’, particularly as related to legislation concerning Holocaust denial (Koposov, 2018). As Tony Judt once pithily put it: ‘Holocaust recognition is our contemporary European entry ticket’ (2010 [2005]: 803). But the historian’s present tense is no longer ‘contemporary’, as nationalist revivals vie with claims about values mandated by Brussels. Paradoxically, for the moment at least, amongst populist movements – of both the left and the right – even being for or against ‘Brussels’ can express a claim to being European in countries other than the UK.

While letters from Europe need not necessarily be written in any European language (even those that are also, for example, African languages), Lusophone, Francophone, Spanish, Dutch, and even Anglophone, communications could equally come from anywhere in the (neo-colonial) world. As a place of destination and departure, of letters from and to, what might distinguish ‘Europe’, then, in the writing of performance research? Of the many myths of Europe, perhaps that of the impossibility of return – in The Odyssey – remains the most resonant; not least, regarding the ‘letters’ that Penelope wove and unwove daily. Reading with Barbara Cassin (herself reading with Arendt [2016]), this Odyssean nostalgia is still powerful – where the past is a name for what remains unfulfilled in the present, despite modernism’s attempt to locate that longing in the future.

For nearly half a century, the internationalist version of this dynamic was preserved by the Cold War; where today, as Dan Stone notes, the return of nationalism seems like its reversal: ‘Whatever the precise reasons for right-wing populism’s growth, it could only have happened in the context of the breakdown of the postwar settlement. At the same time, the rise of populism confirms that settlement’s end’ (2017: 277). Here we encounter a curious blurring of the correspondence between ‘from’ and ‘to’ when addressing the past. Is this nationalism a return to the past or a return from the past? Given the paradoxical place of English in political exchange within the EU, how do the possibilities of translation figure in these strange historical displacements?

As indicated by its widespread use, for instance, in performance surtitles today (with the globalisation of audiences), English has superseded both French and German, and (at least, during the Cold War) Russian, as a European ‘lingua franca’. How does this both limit and expand the possibilities of – and for – comparative performance research? How is the vocabulary of and for performance research developed between different European languages, as distinct from being ‘universalised’ by an English that separates those who make apologies for it and those who don’t experience any need to? Where dialogue between European theatres is so often already filtered through translation into English – rather than between neighbouring languages (as, for example, between Polish and Czech; Hungarian and Rumanian; Dutch and French) – then the sense of the regional, or ‘European’, becomes curiously re-aligned. (In another ‘letter from Europe’, with reflections on attending the 2017 national theatre festival in Estonia, I also explored similar questions [Twitchin, 2018].) What becomes of translation when it abstracts not from the different languages of the performance and research about which we communicate, but into another language – English – that is not historically identified with the particular work being addressed? Is this another variation of what Borges wonderfully described as ‘Averroes’ search’, or is it something culturally entropic?

In the correspondence between languages (besides the question of translatability), there is a literal question of borders. The privilege of citizenship in the Schengen Zone (to which the UK has, however, never been party) allows a view of those particular ‘letters of introduction’ called passports (a concern of Zbigniew Warpechowski’s in 1997) as being, again, documents of the past – at least, when travelling to and from countries within Europe. Like stamp collecting in the age of email, this has become symbolic of a sense of ‘progress’ that may also be invested with nostalgia. It is, indeed, curious how the idea of Brexit aligns with that of something deemed historically ‘regressive’ or ‘progressive’, hinting at a politics that too few politicians seem capable of articulating – perhaps because of a failure to engage with modes of cultural memory as practices of performance research. But the privilege of cultural exchange is relative to another reality of borders, addressing forced migration, exile, and the seeking of refuge and asylum. Here borders are not just legalistic, but often translate relations between past and present into those between life and death. The complicity of state violence and law (chronicled, for instance, by Hsiao-Hung Pai [2018]) could not be clearer – nor any more disenchanted from the feeling of nostalgia.

The orientation towards exclusion ‘within’ Europe, however, manifestly concerns many of its privileged citizens also, who have not felt that privilege themselves from being part of the EU’s historical ‘project’. The precarity imposed by the global economy, where outsourcing is entwined with migration, becomes a cause in an opposite sense to that of enabling cultural exchange. Borders run invisibly within people, after all, where orientations – in every sense – are engaged with political and cultural performance. An obvious example might be between Ossies and Wessies in Germany today; but we might think of remainers and leavers in the UK; or self-proclaimed nationalists and cosmopolitans everywhere – not to mention refugees and those who have the privilege of remaining ‘at home’.

On what stuff might ‘European’ performance research be made, then, alongside the attacks by ‘illiberal democracies’ on Brussels-mandated recognition for human (or at least citizens’) rights? (Viktor Orbán’s self-styled confrontation by means of what, in Brussels, would be an oxymoron speaks frighteningly for a Continent-wide, right-wing populism.) To take but one example: Elfriede Jelinek’s performance text, Charges, offers a version of The Supplicants as an instance of contemporary theatre drawing on the ancient Greek plays that have become European in their multiple translations – whereby Antigone, for example, is known across the continent, as Bulgarian, Finnish, Italian… The sad fact is, however, that Gitta Honegger’s translation of Jelinek’s play into English (2016 [2013]) was not commissioned for a production in the UK. Indeed, although part of the repertoire in Europe, this Nobel Prize-winning author is almost never performed for a British audience. Unlike research exchange – supported by such publications as Performance Research (for which thanks to the editors and the publishers!) – there is relatively little exchange of actual performance across the channel. Outside of the famous international festivals, the work of artists and companies that tours regularly between venues across the continent rarely visits Britain, even as it is performed with English surtitles – not for any English audience present necessarily, but for local international ones from Lisbon to Tallinn.

Being myself an Anglophoney, I have often wondered why I never hear ‘apologies for my English’ being offered by a native speaker at conferences. Such apologies might seem to be addressed to those for whom English is their first language, but this is not necessarily so. They offer, rather, a polite recognition that other participants are communicating together in at least a second language – a language that is not the native tongue of any one of them. For a while, in the wake of Brexit, apologies were also often heard from those coming to conferences from the UK – ashamed by the implications of speaking in the language of a nation that appeared not to care about participating in a ‘common cultural space’ or a ‘European imaginary’. But inevitably, perhaps, these were still given (unapologetically) in English.

When English is a medium for this internationalism, it is curious that it should be a cause for apologies from those taking the trouble to communicate in it, rather than those for whom it offers such a gift of participation. In this context, then, it is a privilege to receive a new ‘letter from Europe’ (albeit from Paris, not Prague or Porto), which this brief note allows an opportunity to share. To return to an earlier question – concerning the destination and departure of letters addressing European performance research, howsoever ‘provincialising’ it may be (Chakrabarty, 2008) – this letter is an invitation to participate in a new research network: the European Association for the Study of Theatre and Performance (EASTAP). Founded at the initiative of Josette Féral, it has held inaugural meetings and plans to hold a conference later this year (2018), where the potential exchange of questions (rather than answers, perhaps) may be – unapologetically – discussed, albeit still (for the time being) in English, the language here of “performance research”.

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