

“THE” LANGUAGE DOES NOT EXIST

Myriam Suchet – My interest is in language. More precisely, I investigate what we call “a tongue” and the imagination attached to its representation. It seems to me that we tend to inhabit our language, especially if we believe to master only one, just as the goldfish inhabits its bowl: convinced that it evolves in a natural environment because its limits are so transparent that one overlooks their historical, contingent construction. I hold literature to be a prodigious tool in this respect, for it momentarily re-opacifies the bowl’s limits or knocks into them. It helps us remember their existence and reveals that there is nothing like “a language” or “a tongue”. The French language does not exist, nor do English, German or Inuktitut exist as “a language”. I believe this awareness to be extremely important for revealing the bowl’s limits throws into question the identity of the fish inside it.

As soon as we admit that “the language” as such doesn’t exist, “the identity”, loses its evidence and tends to diffract. Literature thus enables the de-familiarization of both language and one-self. Any literature can have such an effect, but I chose to focus mainly on so-called “postcolonial” texts. The “postcolonial” label is far from perfect, but it is effective in designating the power relations within a poetics – that is, the way a text is written, rather than what it is about. Each text has a manner, just as a painting does, that weaves it as a textile – both “text” and “textile” have the same etymology. It is precisely this manner with which the text is woven that tells us something of its intricate power relations.

To characterize the poetics of these texts, I borrowed a term from literary critic Rainier Grutman: “heterolingualism”. Grutman coined this neologism to depart from bilingualism (an individual ability to speak two languages), diglossia (a social configuration) and also from pluri- or multilingualism (the co-presence of diverse languages). Heterolingualism stresses the importance on difference rather than on plurality, a difference between languages and also among each of them: with/in “the” tongue itself. I am now developing an interdisciplinary approach. Heterolingualism becomes a method for questioning including “the language” that I speak (or write) right now, namely the Universitarian language. This is the reason why I choose to speak of “indiscipline” rather than multi- or pluri-discipline: its aim is more radical than just bridging instituted disciplines. Indiscipline is altogether a form of thought – and in this sense I call it “indisciplinarity”, with an universitarian suffix. It is also a way of life that is very undisciplined, just like the bad pupil sitting at the very back of the classroom!

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