



# How Bilingual Novelists Utilize their Linguistic Knowledge: Towards a Typology of the Contemporary ‘Modern Languages Novel’ in English

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## ABSTRACT

We present in survey form a typology of a new sub-genre we term the English ‘Modern Languages Novel’, identifying four overlapping categories in a large sample of fiction, most of it by authors whose work has been submitted to the Booker or Man-Booker Prize over fifty years between 1969 and 2018. The four types are: novels featuring a cultural intermediary, such as a language teacher or spy, as narrative focaliser in a foreign setting (Travel); novels written after a period of exposure to linguistic and cultural difference but which do not directly thematise the experience (Alienation); novels with snippets of untranslated dialogue or other quotations from other languages (The Non-Translated); and finally novels set in a new language environment without an Anglophone focaliser (Assimilation). We comment on examples of each type and present an explanation for the invisibility of the sub-genre up to now.

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This article sets out to test Anthony Burgess's injunction that it is 'a British writer's duty to get out of Britain if he can and examine the English language against the foil of other tongues' (Burgess 1976). We map out ways in which some prominent contemporary writers of English make use of their knowledge of other languages either *in* or *for* their prose fiction – for the purposes of our argument an apparently subtle but nonetheless crucial distinction – and provide an explanation for the relative invisibility hitherto of this inverted type of translingual writing. Foreign languages are quoted rarely and sparingly in the English novel, but authorial exposure to another language has redirected literary careers, for example by opening interests in historical fiction or sci-fi, or causing a reassessment of gender identity. The languages in question are overwhelmingly European, with French by some margin the most common. We ask a number of questions. How does the experience of another language and/or of living outside an English-speaking environment impact on literary practice? How and when are the places where these other languages are spoken written about, if they are written about at all? Are there elements of 'translingualism' in the fiction written by this, in many ways disparate, group?

Our starting point was to mine a corpus of novels eligible for entry for the Booker or Man-Booker Prize between 1969 and 2018 for traces of linguistic knowledge beyond English (which up to 2014 excluded US novelists). This entailed evaluating publicity materials and interviews, consulting biographies of older or more established writers, contacting others still working, examining their literary journalism, noting translation work and making deductions with respect to fiction set in non-English-speaking locations. The corpus expanded to include other fiction published by these short-listed writers. We refer also to some well-known contemporaneous cases overlooked by the Booker or ineligible for it, such as the translator of French, Angela Carter, and Germanophile John Le Carré, as well as prominent Americans, such as the former student of German, Jonathan Franzen. We make some comparisons, too, with previous periods.

The theorization of bilingualism and translingualism in literature is an expanding field, with major studies of literary multilingualism, the status of the mother tongue compared with 'language mothers', the relationships between major and minor languages as well as the rise of English and the trend in the modern age towards monolingualism (see Gramling 2016; Kellman; Mizimura; Walkowitz; Yildiz). Kellman distinguishes between 'monolingual translinguals' and 'ambilinguals' (Kellman 20), but does not consider the group of writers that interest us. Walkowitz, in her equally influential monograph, is interested exclusively in bilingual writers who choose one of their languages over the other as their vehicle of literary expression. We argue that we have identified a new category of translingualism and a subgenre of literary fiction that we tentatively call 'the Modern Languages Novel'. These are novels by native-speaker writers of English who publish in their first-choice language – which is, moreover, the world's dominant language – but who have learnt a language or languages other than English through travel or education, or because of their family background. We have identified four overlapping types which are presented here in survey form. They are Travel Novels set abroad featuring a cultural intermediary, such as a language teacher or spy, as narrative focalizer; Novels of Alienation written after a period abroad and exposure to linguistic and cultural difference but which do not directly thematize that experience; Novels of the Non-Translated which include snippets of untranslated dialogue or quotations from other languages; and finally Novels of Assimilation set in an entirely new language environment without an Anglophone focalizer. We begin with a historical sketch and an account of why the 'Modern Languages Novel' in English has been unrecognized.

Among writers born in the British Isles, the practice of publishing in multiple languages was last common during the late Renaissance. The poet John Milton is often cited as a leading example from the seventeenth century. According to Leonard Forster in a pioneering study of multilingual European literatures: 'For Milton [...] there is no mystique about languages; they are simply different media in which he can work – be expected to work' (Forster 47). Milton's English style is described as 'Latinated' and bears the imprint of other languages he knew, these being Ancient Greek and Italian as well as Latin. For the advocate of literary multilingualism, George Steiner: 'There is scarcely a passage in [...] *Paradise Lost* or in Milton's prose which does not bear witness to the Latin substratum and to the enriching intervention of other tongues' (Steiner 79–80). It was the Romantic Revival in the following century that cemented the exclusive use of English by English writers (Yildiz 6–10; Gramling 2017: 35–44). It is not that the Romantics were

stay-at-homes or mean linguists: Keats and Shelley are buried in Rome, Byron in Greece, while Wordsworth visited France during the Revolution, and Coleridge read the German philosophers. From this point, however, there was little doubt that English should be the language of literary expression for English writers. Native languages became national languages across Europe as nation states instituted language policies. A line of thought now developed that writers needed to be immersed only in the language they wrote in so as to know all its tricks, nuances, double meanings and the rich lexical resonances running back through its unique tradition, possessing what the multilingual Vladimir Nabokov called ‘the baffling mirror, the black velvet backdrop, the implied associations and traditions – which the native illusionist, frac-tails flying, can magically use to transcend the heritage in his own way’ (qtd. in Kellman 18). Interference from outside could disrupt concentration and make for bad style. Steiner disagreed with this proposition, contending: ‘The actual history of Western literature (and of philosophy and the sciences) [...] point[s] the other way’ (Steiner 92). Canonical writers of English who still made use of other European languages include the Brontës, George Eliot, T.S. Eliot and D.H. Lawrence, but it is James Joyce and the trio of translanguals, Samuel Beckett, Joseph Conrad and Nabokov himself who tend to be the subject of studies. They write English differently as a result of their foreign language knowledge – Conrad and Nabokov because English was once foreign to them, Beckett because he wrote French first, as on occasion did fellow Irishman, Oscar Wilde (Taylor-Batty; Williams). For Joyce as an Irishman English remained a borrowed tongue as it was for Stephan Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. In a discussion with his dean, the student Dedalus reflects: ‘The language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine. How different are the words *home, Christ, ale, master*, on his lips and on mine! I cannot speak or write these words without unrest of spirit’ (Joyce, 194).

The reasons for writers’ knowledge of other languages have evolved in the period covered by our Booker survey, but the most common remain migration and mixed parentage, followed by education and travel. D.M. Thomas and Michael Frayn learnt Russian on National Service, while Burgess learnt Spanish during war service in Gibraltar. Empire backgrounds could also foster multilingualism. Lawrence Durrell was born in India and lived in Greece, Egypt and France. Jewish writers, either refugees or children of immigrants, brought with them knowledge of other European languages, or acquired it more eagerly. Anita Brookner was the daughter of Polish Jews and specialized as an academic in French art. John Berger, whose grandfather was born in Trieste and who lived for four decades in France, identified as European rather than British. The opening up of Eastern Europe in the early 1990s enabled writers like Tom McCarthy to work in Prague and A.D. Miller in Moscow.

Durrell called himself ‘an English European’ and lived outside the UK all his life, mainly in France. He identifies the Second World War as another turning point in attitudes towards living outside Britain:

It seems to be rather a tradition to pan us for living abroad nowadays. But I attribute that to the war. It’s been a very long and indeed a very healthy tradition on the part of English writers to live abroad, at least to visit. There was the tradition of the Grand Tour in the eighteenth century [...] and my own heroes when I was twenty-one, the period of Robert Graves, Richard Aldington, Huxley, and so on – they all spent very many years abroad. (Durrell 54)

The literary narrative of British engagement with other countries is indeed often about twentieth-century war and conflict. In each of the four categories in our typology there are examples of fiction inspired by the world wars.

## 1. TRAVEL

The global role of English has arguably played a more dynamic part in writers’ exposure to other languages than war. Fiction set abroad featuring a bi-cultural focalizer, whether visitor, language teacher or spy, is the first category in our typology. Colm Tóibín (in Spain) and David Peace (in Japan) have both spent substantial periods teaching English abroad, as of course did James Joyce. TEFL teachers feature frequently in British post-war fiction, including John Fowles, *The Magus* (1965), Barry Unsworth, *The Greeks Have a Word for It* (1967), Alan Hollinghurst, *The Folding Star* (1994), Tim Parks, *Europa* (1997), and Tom McCarthy, *Men in Space* (2007). All teachers of foreign languages function as cultural intermediaries. Parks’s *Europa*, which

is peppered with Italian and French phrases, centres on an academic teacher travelling from Milan to Strasbourg with his colleagues to petition the European Parliament about the Italian government docking the pay of foreign language teachers. Dumped by his French lover after leaving his wife for her, Jeremiah Marlowe, 45, is disillusioned and compares the chimera of intra-European harmony with that of satisfaction in love. It is as if he has never come back from his year abroad and he is understandably grumpy about how his life has turned out. Unsworth's early fiction was inspired by experiences living and teaching in France, Greece and Turkey. *The Greeks Have a Word for It* focuses on an imposter, who next to the spy and double agent represents a definite type in fiction featuring linguists. Bryan Kennedy gets a job in an Athens language school with fake references and made-up qualifications. He also invents poets' names in his literature classes. While he is aware of language difference, it is odd that he expects to speak French on arrival and refers derogatorily to fellow passengers on the boat that gets him there. *Pascali's Island* (1980) is set among Greek speakers in the dying days of Ottoman rule and takes the form of a series of reports written by an undercover informer, the bisexual Basil Pascali, son of an English acrobat and sex-worker and an unknown father. Standing betwixt and between identities and consequently owing allegiance to none, he is the quintessential linguist as anti-hero. In Fowles's *The Magus* – a novel about language-learning, role play and self-discovery – the foreign adventures of Nicolas Urfe begin after he takes a job teaching English on another Greek island.

John Le Carré specialized in figures such as Urfe, who lost his parents early and is on the lookout for new role models and loyalties. According to Le Carré's biographer, he 'was influenced by his German master Frank King, who had taught him that "the love we have for other languages intensifies and explains the love we have for our own". To possess another language, King told the boys, is to possess another soul (a saying attributed to Charlemagne)' (Sisnam n.p.). In Le Carré's masterpiece *Tinker, Taylor, Soldier, Spy* (1974), characters can similarly be judged according to their use and abuse of their language knowledge. In novels such as *A Perfect Spy* (1986) and *Absolute Friends* (2003), the best linguists cannot be trusted; they have divided loyalties, emotional and amorous bonds with another camp, making them ideal recruitment targets for foreign intelligence agencies. The linguist as hustler, fraud or paid informer has a long literary pedigree. One of the best novels on such a figure was written in German by the Bulgarian-born language-switcher Ilija Trojanow, who entitled his bio-fiction of the imperial translator and super-linguist, Richard Burton, *The Collector of Worlds*.<sup>1</sup>

The German-Japanese writer Yoko Tawada has explained that she has more freedom in German, which she learnt as a young adult, than in Japanese, which has known since infancy. Tawada, who has regularly theorized her own writing, is one of the most researched contemporary German authors. She claims to be able to write more playfully in her second language, as she is not attached to linguistic associations between words and things which have become so familiar that they appear natural in her mind (Tawada 11–12). A similarly liberating effect can be achieved through learning a second language and comparing it with your first, as the multilingual Burgess insisted that he wanted to do. Alan Hollinghurst in *The Folding Star* (1994), which is set partly in Belgium where the narrator Ian Manners is an English teacher, downplays Manners's investment in Flemish and French in a way that is typical in this corpus. Having gained his readers' trust and interest, however, Manners begins to explore the basis of his fluency midway through this first-person narrative, recalling his discovery in the sixth form of his boarding school of the fun to be had from 'doing French' with his friend Graves:

We egged each other on into a language world of our own. It was Graves who located and nourished my vein of pedantry, and together, like mad academicians, we established a complex of unwritten rules and forfeits, making even our Latinist housemaster uneasy about entering our study. The discovery of French classical drama was a major step: after a term with our A-level texts we were recycling alexandrines and spoke with a marked sense of the caesura. Graves was very taken with the *précieux*, plonkily translated into English: anyone who offended him was said to have 'soiled his glory', and it was rare for him to refer to his feet as anything but his 'poor sufferers'. This fitted well with our pained avoidance of monosyllables and abhorrence of abbreviations. In a school where a typical notice might read

<sup>1</sup> Ilija Trojanow's *Der Weltensammler* (2006) was translated by William Hobson as *The Collector of Worlds: A Novel of Sir Richard Francis Burton* (2009).

'All RHJ report to BOC at 3 for TP' we held out for old-fashioned queenery and unnecessary effort. One year for the whole of Lent there were fines for using the first-person singular: at weekends I would run up on to the common shouting 'I,I,I,I,I' like a madman with a terrible stammer. (Hollinghurst 209)

The boys' expressive range in English improves as they become more inventive and linguistically aware through studying classical French literature. Their discovery recalls Yasemin Yildiz's characterization of the importance of Yiddish for Kafka: 'Although Kafka never considered writing in Yiddish [...] his writings about that language productively altered his relationship to the German language and allowed him to express the uncanniness of his "mother tongue"' (Yildiz 206). Hollinghurst is a published translator of the classical French playwright Jean Racine. His own knowledge of French is thus on a par with Kafka's of Yiddish.

McCarthy's *Men in Space*, a comic thriller set in Prague and Amsterdam, involves elaborate inter-language jokes between international ex-pats. Its title, which refers ostensibly to a plot strand about the Moon landings, describes the experience of living among speakers of other languages. McCarthy's characters are used to language-switching and translating to and from, but he also draws attention to the limits of their communicative abilities. The main British character Nicholas Boardman is told off by a waiter and wants to answer back but finds 'his Czech grammar is not up to the exchange'; he can only stammer the equivalent of 'The rules have no interest ... I don't interest myself towards ... For me, the rules' (McCarthy 32). He takes a delight in the peculiarities of Czech, which is typical of the novel's other characters. On hearing his name called out, for example, he muses:

*Nee-koo*: the vocative, no less. All nouns decline here, bifurcate within each case according to whether they're animate or inanimate, bifurcate again depending on their final syllable (hard or soft), then trifurcate from there along lines of gender, m/f/n. That's six times two, equals twelve, times two, equals twenty-four times ..., it is not my own!] Impossible to remember is what it is, all these inflections. He's got his own name down, though. In the ablative it becomes *Nickem* – a thieves' credo; in the dative it's *Nickovi*, which always makes him think of the V shape of girls' knickers. (McCarthy 34–5)

The embedding of a philological explanation in a pop-literary comparison demonstrates that genre fiction can embrace a multilingual aesthetic.

Linguist novelists also act in the capacity of cultural intermediaries through writing reviews or critical introductions or by making public interventions, even working as part-time agents of cultural diplomacy. Julian Barnes plays such a role in Anglo-French cultural relations. *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984) is narrated by a British expert in French Studies, researching the biography of the French nineteenth-century novelist. The eponymous parrot supposedly refers to that which inspired Flaubert's famous short story *Un coeur simple*, but the narrator also 'remembered the trademark of the Carthaginian interpreters in *Salammô*: each, as a symbol of his profession, has a parrot tattooed on his chest' (Barnes 20). The Francophile Anglophone narrator presents Flaubert's life as an interpreter who is relaying and transposing it from French to English, that is in Barnes' terms as his parrot. There are probably two principal ways in which we can learn about another country by reading literature: we can read translations, or we can read home-grown products set in those countries or about people from them.<sup>2</sup> Such fiction can trade in stereotypes. In translation it can also provide domestic readers a sense of outside validation. Kurt Vonnegut is respected in Dresden for his depiction of the Allied bombing of that city in *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969). Christopher Isherwood's Berlin Novels, *Mr Norris Changes Trains* (1935) and *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939), are among the most widely read German novels by a British writer. Isherwood deploys an autobiographically marked British narrator as a bi-cultural filter or narrative focalizer – a role also played by his most famous character, the would-be actress and singer Sally Bowles. Transformed into the film musical *Cabaret* in 1973, West Berlin gained cultural capital by its association with the original location. After the atrocities in Paris in November 2015, Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast* (1964) translated as *Paris est une fête* topped the French bestseller lists. The gunmen deliberately attacked entertainment venues which they associated with the spirit of Paris beloved of its inhabitants and international visitors. Outside

<sup>2</sup> This can be a very rich topic, depending on the context. For Russian understanding of French and other Western countries through translated literature, see Gilburd.

France, these ‘Parisian vignettes’ cultivate a certain idea of France which is not necessarily very French. Are Isherwood and Hemingway role models for the Anglophone linguist-novelist today? In her bestselling *Chocolat* (1999) and its sequels, Joanne Harris arguably treads in their footsteps by presenting rural France as a strange and different place which is in need of explanation (see Durham).

## 2. ALIENATION

According to the American author Jonathan Franzen, paraphrasing the Viennese satirist Karl Kraus, Hemingway and Isherwood took the easy route to writing because travel affords all of us something to say. Franzen explains what he takes to be an amusing sentence by Kraus: ‘Kraus is again going after easiness – here, the ease with which foreign travel lends spice to writing. The joke is, approximately, that the jungle is fascinating to us non-jungle dwellers, and that we mistake this fascination for talent on the writer’s part’ (Franzen 2013: 27). Franzen’s kind-of-novel *The Kraus Project* (2013) consists of two essays by Kraus, in the original German and in parallel English translation, offset by commentaries in footnotes co-written with the German scholar Paul Reitter and the Austrian novelist Daniel Kehlmann. These notes, which often take over the entire page, explain Kraus’s works, drawing comparisons between the culture wars of his day and those in pre-Trump America, while accounting for Franzen’s interest in Kraus which he developed as a Fulbright scholar in West Berlin in the early 1980s (Barbee). Franzen’s student German years were his literary apprenticeship, which he spent wrestling with the foreign language, reading frighteningly difficult texts and trying to translate them. He was also corresponding with a girlfriend back home, whom he insisted he wanted to marry even though he knew that it would be a mistake, while cutting himself off socially in his new environment. Franzen, who published his first novel in 1988, did not write about Germany or Germans in his fiction until his fifth novel, *Purity*, published in 2015, but he achieved adult self-awareness and an understanding of how literature connects with life by studying German, mainly at university in the United States (see the chapter ‘The Foreign Language’ in Franzen 2006: 117–56).

Franzen’s case highlights that language knowledge does not have to be visible in the fiction that derives from and depends on it. Indeed, writers of English with experience of another country and its language are more inclined to take Franzen’s route in their literary careers than that of Hemingway and Isherwood. The encounter with abroad is thus transmuted in their subsequent writing. Both Angela Carter and Hilary Mantel record a sensation akin to self-obliteration when immersed in an alien environment, followed by renewal. Carter, a French-to-English translator, wrote sparingly about her stay in Japan, except sometimes in journalism (Carter 1997: 231–70), even though it changed both the way she wrote and how thought about herself. According to Helen Snaith,

her time abroad saw a shift in her writing style, her sensibilities and her understanding of her own Judeo-Christian culture. Peering through the looking-glass perched on the edge of Asia, it was in Japan that Carter learnt ‘what it was to be a woman and became radicalised’. (Snaith 9)

Carter’s only partly Japanese book is the slim collection *Fireworks: Nine Profane Pieces* (1974). There is no autobiographically inspired novel about an English woman living in Japan, becoming absorbed by Bunraku puppet plays, Kurosawa films and Japanese modernist classics, all the while experiencing her environment as a set of difficult-to-decipher signs. A lesser author would have written that novel. Carter was fascinated, however, by her own double objectification as a non-Japanese-speaking Western female under a usually male Oriental gaze and this experience surely informed post-Japan novels such as the feminist dystopia *The Passion of New Eve* (1977). Here she anticipates Yann Martel’s multilingual *Self* (1996) in depicting an involuntary sex change as a manifestation of identity disruption caused by a switch in languages or locations. Natsumi Ikoma explains Carter’s Japanese experience in the following terms: ‘It seemed, for her, to be an experience of losing one’s subjectivity within masculinist discourse, and putting herself and lover in a situation she described as “a philosophic assassination”’ (Ikoma 82). Carter too describes her encounter with the Japanese language, which she did not learn to speak with any fluency, in terms of destruction:

The Japanese language itself poses – or, rather, annihilates – many problems for the European. For example, there is no Japanese word which roughly corresponds to the great contemporary supranotation, ‘identity’, and there is hardly an adequate equivalent for the verb ‘to be’. (Carter 1997: 204)

The experience of foreignness and non-comprehension is foundational to Carter’s post-Japan fiction, albeit that experience is not directly depicted. Her case underlines the fact that experience of abroad does not have to have a language dimension: Carter learnt only rudimentary Japanese. Similarly, J.G. Ballard revealed that he ‘lived in Shanghai for fifteen years and never learned a word of Chinese’ (Ballard 2008: 33). Yet, as a result of this period, on arrival in the UK he experienced his parents’ native country as foreign, reflecting in his autobiography: ‘As a writer I’ve treated England as if it were a strange fiction’ (Ballard 2008: 35). Novels about new linguistic environments or by writers who have experienced them often have evocative titles suggestive of personal decentring and radical disconnection. Penelope Fitzgerald’s *Offshore* (1979) is based in the UK but its title anticipates her trio of late works set in Italy, Russia and Germany. Similar titles are J.G. Farrell’s *A Man from Elsewhere*, McCarthy’s *Men in Space*, even Berger’s *Once in Europa*.

Farrell provides a related case to Carter. He is best known for his ‘Empire Trilogy’ which is set in India, Singapore and Ireland (*Troubles*, *The Singapore Grip* and *The Siege of Krishnapur*, 1970–78). According to the author’s note for *A Man from Elsewhere* (1963), his largely forgotten first novel, Farrell had Anglo-Irish parents and lived in France for two years before starting a degree in French and Spanish. *A Man from Elsewhere* is set in France, deals with the subject of revolutionary politics and features veterans of the Spanish Civil War, but it is less about negotiating French and Spanish experience than it is an English version of a French existentialist novel. The point Farrell illustrates once again is that experience of the foreign is a spur to creativity, rather than an inspiration per se. If an encounter with abroad as a young adult deserves a chapter to itself in literary history, then it is less because of works depicting this sometimes life-changing experience than because it can stimulate or redirect the literary imagination.

Mantel transposed her experiences of living in Saudi Arabia into her third novel, *Eight Months on Ghazzah Street* (1988), her title possibly echoing the 1980s horror franchise *Nightmare on Elm Street*. The novel is about an immersive encounter with alienation, in which the central character, Frances Shore, learns about her role as a female in both Eastern and Western versions of patriarchy. This is a year abroad as nightmare cut short, as all her attempts to interact with the Saudi Arabians fail. It is rare for any of the expatriate community to speak any Arabic, but this appears to be the way their hosts want it. Shore’s female neighbour refuses to help her learn, and the textbook she buys does not meet her needs as a woman who is not allowed to take a job or circulate freely in public:

The hero of her language book is a businessman, Mr Smith. Occasionally, in later lessons, he will express concern for the welfare of his wife and children, who are back in the USA. But mostly he leads a free, gay kind of life; the Arabic speakers he meets take a keen interest in all his doings. He goes to the souk to buy a carved chest; he travels a lot; he gets into endless wrangles about small change. It is a man’s book; not fit for her. She would not need half these phrases. ‘In a courtyard is a tree on which there are fruits whose colour is red. We sit in our garden. The weather is fine.’ (Mantel 1988: 205)

Each of the eight months of the novel’s title has a chapter to itself, except that these months have Arabic names from the Hijri calendar: Muharram, Safar, Rabi al-awal, Rabi al-thani, Jamadi al-awal, Jamadi al-thani, Rajab and Shaban. Time in Saudi Arabia ‘can appear to run backwards’ writes Mantel in an author’s note prefacing the main text. One recurrent Arabic word is that for white-skinned Westerners, *khawwadjih* (Mantel 1988: 55, 224, 251), indicating that they are aware of their own objectification by their hosts. As a foreigner and especially as a woman (‘not a person anymore’ (29)), Shore faces the obliteration of her identity in a non-encounter. Mantel recalls that her own ‘life in Saudi Arabia, for at least two years, was like a life in gaol’ (2003: 213). This challenging experience is surely important for Mantel’s development as a writer who would go on to make her name exploring that foreign country which is the past. This category of fiction represented by Carter, Farrell, Franzen and Mantel is the second category in the typology.

A third overlapping category of the Modern Languages Novel is that which deploys phrases in other languages in a depiction of intercultural exchange. A. S. Byatt's *The Children's Book* (2009) chronicles multiple intellectual, artistic and amorous interactions between English and continental figures. Its narrative end-point is the First World War which puts an end to pan-European communication. Byatt is an exception to the rule of language reticence among Anglophone writers. Prompted by academic researchers, she revealed her own experiences with German and affirmed that George Eliot's knowledge of the same language 'changed the way she wrote very, very deeply', enabling her to embark on that most un-English of genres, 'a novel of ideas'. Learning German helped Byatt herself, she believes. After reading a novella by Thomas Mann at school, she recalls that she thought

here is something which has a completely perfect shape. And it has a completely evoked set of characters and a completely perfect idea, and I don't know anything in English written like that. [...] I learnt a lot from the rhythm of things in *Tonio Kröger*. (Byatt 2016: 9)

Berger's *G. A Novel* (1972), also set in pre-1914 Europe, incorporates words and phrases from Italian. His first novel *A Painter of our Time* (1958) was subtitled *A Portrait of the Artist as Emigré* and consisted mostly of journal entries ostensibly translated from Hungarian. In formal terms *G.* is modernist, emulating cubism and enacting theoretical tropes from Walter Benjamin's newly translated 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', eschewing conventional realism in favour of metafiction and multiple narratives encompassing historical, philosophical and political topics. As Geoff Dyer writes:

In the 1950s, Berger's political campaign for realism against abstract expressionism was partly determined by the absence of a Marxist modernism in this country. The conspicuous modernism of *G.* is less an abandonment of realist principles than an attempt to achieve a Marxist modernism. (Dyer 87–8)

In other words, Berger is importing both foreign material and foreign forms as well as a foreign words.

Berger's eponymous hero (*G.* is short for Giovanni) is half-Italian and half-American and was brought up mostly in England. He plays the role of the bi-cultural mediator or filter who is usually central to fiction set abroad but whom Berger will abandon in later novels set in France. In *G.* Berger highlights language difference, outlining his twin themes of politics and love. We have: 'la Bestia', the women's nickname for *G.*'s already married Italian father, Umberto; 'passeretta mia' (my sparrow), Umberto's nickname for his Anglo-American mistress, Laura, who becomes *G.*'s mother; 'Roma o morte'; 'matta' (mad woman), and 'i teppisti'. The glossed phrases can be taken as key conceptual terms. The narrator explains the dialectic at work:

Umberto terms madness that which threatens the social structure guaranteeing his privileges. *I teppisti* are the final embodiment of madness. Yet madness also represents freedom from the social structures which hems [sic] him in. And so he arrives at the conclusion that limited madness may grant him greater liberty within the structure. (Berger 1972: 11)

The technique is developed further when the 11-year-old Giovanni meets his father for the first time when he visits Milan. Italian was the language of his parents' intimacy, as he notices when he hears his father ask: 'Shall we eat *Pollo all Cacciatore*?' (65), a dish that Laura once enjoyed. Giovanni asks what the words mean but gleans also what the shared memory of these words signifies to his parents, which is far more than the literal meaning. Mother, child and father are close to each other and at the same time mutually alien and unknowable, which is underlined through shared and unshared languages. The main event of the third chapter is Giovanni's experience of a popular demonstration that ends in a massacre, which he can understand only by seeing since he cannot comprehend what any of the participants are saying. His incomprehension becomes clear to the working-class protestors who are ready to accept him as a witness. The mill girls even go so far as to take him as an ambassador 'between the romantic dreams of their own childhood and the men from whom in reality they must soon choose' (68). An older girl takes him by the hand as they run away from the cavalry: 'The meaning of her words seems unimportant to him; what is important is that what he is seeing,

he is seeing in her presence' (72). Through words on the page, Berger conveys here that there is communication beyond language and that a visual impression shared with a fellow human being can imprint itself on the memory more forcefully than a verbal message.

Anita Brookner's *Hotel du Lac* (1984) indicates an engagement with abroad in its title. This novel concerns a female British writer recuperating after a difficult experience, which turns out to be her flight from her own wedding, in an eponymous Swiss establishment noted for its discretion. Brookner's central character, the romantic novelist Edith Hope, is also discrete about her language knowledge and mixed Anglo-Austrian parentage, but she eventually reveals how her parents met when her father was lodging with her mother's family while studying in Vienna. Her mother and aunt both found the foreign students exciting for as long as they were on Austrian soil, but dull once they were living at their side as academics' wives back in the UK. Their liaison makes Edith the child of a year abroad – though given the centrality of Vienna in pre-war Jewish culture, one senses that this is a cypher for the author's own European Jewish heritage. In *Hotel du Lac* there is not much of an encounter with abroad because the drama is being worked out back at home. The people whom Edith meets are also all English native speakers, relegating French to the medium of communication with the hotel staff. But Edith asserts her independence by defying social expectations and rejecting a second offer of marriage. The attentive reader may notice that she does so by referring positively to two French writers, Colette and Proust, and recalling two German phrases uttered by her unhappily married mother and aunt: 'Schrecklich! Schrecklich!' and 'Ach, du, Schreck!' (Brookner 49, 182). The emotion is more immediately and intensely expressed in German, which was their shared mother tongue. The French references are meanwhile quietly subversive. Looking for something to read on the evening of the second day, Edith decides against Henry James in favour of 'a volume of short stories, the beautifully named *Ces plaisirs, qu'on nomme, à la légère physiques*. Colette, that sly old fox, would, she trusted, see her through' (67). The ironically disjointed Colette title remains un-glossed. Towards the end, as she is burning her bridges with her new and highly conventional suitor, Edith cites Swann saying that Odette was not his type. For this resolutely English spinster writer, German expresses horror at marital misery and French connotes sexual liberation. Brookner, who is noted for her restraint and understatement, captures her character's dilemma and its resolution all the more powerfully through reference to two foreign phrases. In Ali Smith's *How to be Both* (2014), multilingual elements are deployed to similar metaphoric effect.<sup>3</sup>

The use of other languages in the novels discussed up to now is imaginative and metaphorical, but the willingness to quote in other languages strictly limited. Novels by the half-Swiss Christine Brooke-Rose (*Between*, 1968) and the Irish Aidan Higgins (*Balcony of Europe*, 1972) were, in their day, exceptions to this rule. To write bilingually or multilingually for an Anglophone readership is also to challenge translators who work from English – that language which is more translated from than into – given that other languages 'are administered [...] in an ethnographic or pedagogic mode pressuring the lowest common denominator, Anglophone monolingualism' (Lennon 10). In contrast, French-Canadian Yann Martel's autobiographically inspired *Self* contains passages in Czech, German, French, Hungarian and Spanish, sometimes in parallel with English, sometimes not, making it one of the most ambitiously multilingual novels published by a mainstream contemporary writer of English. The nameless narrator recalls that he went to school in English, played outside in Spanish and talked about his life at home in French:

from my earliest years the idea of transformation has been central to my life. Naturally so, I suppose, being the child of diplomats. I changed schools, languages, countries and continents a number of times during my childhood. At each change I had the opportunity to re-create myself, to present a new façade, to bury past errors and misrepresentations. (Martel 8–9)

The mutually incomprehensible dialogue with a new friend called Marisa, whose family has relocated from Czechoslovakia to Paris after the Soviet invasion in 1968, is rendered in her German alongside his Spanish. At 15 the narrator becomes an orphan: an eye-witness account

<sup>3</sup> See a further output associated with this project: Katie Jones, '(m)Other Tongues: Multilingualism in Ali Smith's *How to be Both*', in *International Perspectives on Multilingual Literatures: From Translingualism to Language Mixing* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2021), edited by Katie Jones, Julian Preece and Aled Rees, pp. 198–210.

of the plane crash that killed his parents is rendered in Spanish with parallel English translation. On his 18th birthday the fluidity of his multilingual identity and ability to see the other's point of view lead to his mutation into a female, which he expresses in both French and English, though slightly differently each time. The Francophone and Anglophone Canadian selves are two distinct entities.

The French-Canadian Martel learnt Spanish as a child and was brought up bilingually, like most French Canadians. He is readier to represent language difference in his fiction than his British counterparts, though *Self's* conclusion is hardly hopeful: the narrator's seven years as a woman end after a violent rape, following which she changes back into male shape, at one point externalizing his aggression on a defenceless Native American. With its language and translation games and bilingual sequences of double-columned text, *Self* stands out in Martel's oeuvre as a youthful experiment, however. While he has stuck with international or European subjects in his subsequent more successful work, he no longer includes other languages in his writing. The account in his very first novel of self-dissolution through multilingual confusion arguably reaped creative benefits for Martel as a novelist in similar ways to Carter's experience of Japan and Mantel's of Saudi Arabia.

#### 4. ASSIMILATION

In their late fiction set on the Continent, John Berger and Penelope Fitzgerald dispense with the Anglophile narrative focalizer, writing from within French and German culture respectively – Berger in the *Into their Labours* trilogy (1974–90) set in the mountainous Haute Savoie and Fitzgerald in *The Blue Flower* (1995), an account of the life of the German poet Novalis.<sup>4</sup> Berger believed that what the French peasantry held in common with their counterparts in other countries was more significant than differences of language or nationality. At the same time, because traditional peasant life was dying, French rural culture was as foreign to an urban dweller in France as it was to Berger's English readers.<sup>5</sup>

After *Offshore*, which is about people living on a houseboat that ultimately sank, Fitzgerald wrote a trio of historical novels set outside Britain: *Innocence* (1986) in postwar Italy, *The Beginning of the Spring* (1988) in pre-revolutionary Russia, and *The Blue Flower* (1995) in eighteenth-century Saxony. According to her biographer, she wanted 'to get away from her own experiences. But she also wanted not to be defined by Englishness' and the 'camouflage required the creation of a sense of otherness. We feel in these novels that we are living in another world, listening to people speaking in another language, walking through places where we are not at home' (qtd. in Lee 338). Fitzgerald was not a professional linguist. She spent some holidays in Italy but knew the country mainly through films and books. She took Russian classes and once visited the USSR, but she was steeped in Russian literature in English translation. In the Italian and Russian novels, Fitzgerald deploys English-speaking characters observing the foreign country who serve as bi-cultural intermediaries for her readers, but she did not consult sources in the respective languages (Fitzgerald 2008, xxxvi). Holiday visits to German-speaking locations were only a little more frequent, but once again her knowledge of literature was more significant. Her fourth novel *Human Voices* (1980) was based on Heine's poem 'Der Asra' about a young male slave and the beautiful daughter of the Sultan. The slave is from a tribe in Yemen who die if they fall in love.<sup>6</sup>

Fitzgerald called her last novel *The Blue Flower* a 'not-quite-novel' or 'a novel of sorts' (qtd. in Lee 408). In an author's note, she explains that it 'is based on the life of Friedrich von Hardenberg (1772–1801) before he became famous under the name Novalis' (Fitzgerald 1995), and she expresses gratitude to the editors of the five volumes of his complete works which appeared between 1960 and 1988 in the W. Kohlhammer Verlag. The fifty-five mini-chapters of *The Blue Flower* are immaculately researched; 'The Blue Flower' was Novalis's working title

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4 Three other twentieth-century novels written in English and set in Germany or Austria qualify for this category: Elizabeth von Arnim, *Princess Priscilla's Fortnight* (1905); John Irving, *Setting Free the Bears* (1968); and Walter Abish, *How German Is It?* (1980).

5 See John Berger Archive, British Library: MS88964/1/29 'Notebook (1978–1982)' and MA88964/9/13 'French Essay About John Berger's Peasant Works (Late 1990s)'.

6 Byatt notes: 'She said to me about *Human Voices* that she wished I would write something in the *TLS* or somewhere to point out that it was based on a German poem, by Heine, "Der Asra"' (Byatt 2008: x).

for his novel fragment, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, which means that Fitzgerald is rewriting his most famous work about the pursuit of an unattainable goal. She plunges her readers into an unfamiliar world on the first page of chapter one, 'Washday', narrated from the point of view of an invented character, Jacob Dietmahler, who can tell that the Hardenberg family is much wealthier than his own as the Hardenbergs only need to do their laundry annually: Dietmahler's own mother supervised the washing three times a year, 'therefore the house had linen and underwear for four months only. He himself possessed eighty-nine shirts, no more' (Fitzgerald 1995: 1). There are numerous markers of strangeness in *The Blue Flower*, such as unusual syntax and odd word choice, narrative ellipses between paragraphs and between chapters which can leave a reader guessing, and insertions of German that are not always glossed or explained through context. The novel is about grand themes: love and life and death, as most of the lives depicted are cut tragically, senselessly short. Friedrich Hardenberg is smitten inexplicably, and inappropriately, with the 12-year-old Sophie, who according to others has neither brains nor beauty to commend her and is anyway still a child. She dies at fifteen after undergoing an operation without anaesthetic. *The Blue Flower* tells a universal as well as highly particular story, which Fitzgerald embeds in the materiality of contemporary existence in the Saxon provinces in the decade following the French Revolution. She follows Berger by making language difference a source of both defamiliarization and wonder.

## CONCLUSION

As we have noted, there is little published extended reflection by native-speaker writers of English on the ways in which their knowledge of other languages influences how they write fiction in their mother tongue. In Twitter correspondence in association with the project, for example, authors downplayed their language knowledge. It is also rarely mentioned in paratexts such as blurbs on book covers or in other promotional material. This lack stands in contrast to 'language memoirs' which chronicle their translingual or multilingual authors' linguistic switches and have been in vogue for a number of decades.<sup>7</sup> But professional modesty is usually matched by an unwillingness to draw on this knowledge in writing. For this reason direct citation is usually modest – the exception being epigraph where quotations from major European languages remain acceptable, in line with international practice (Dembeck 193–219). The reticence extends to postcolonial writers. Their language backgrounds vary from bilingual or translingual to English native speaker with little residual knowledge of languages spoken by older generations in their families, though metropolitan scholars who can read their writing in English against their first or other languages are understandably rare. While attention to the language question is paid in standard reference works,<sup>8</sup> in published biographical information, their language switch or wider linguistic knowledge is often obscured or ignored. That Salman Rushdie grew up speaking Urdu as well as English is not central to critics' understanding of his work. This masking of language knowledge, in both texts and paratexts, extends to the authors whose writing this article investigates. According to the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, John Le Carré is the most famous German speaker in the UK, but famous among whom? (Le Carré 2010).

There are clear reasons why writers of English with knowledge of other languages represent an under-researched group which falls through the categories so far elaborated in the critical literature focusing on bilingual or translingual writing. In the absence of authorial self-reflection in essays or interviews, the novels themselves had to be interrogated in order to answer the research questions posed at the beginning of this article. One myth was quickly dispelled: if knowledge of other languages can make for more versatile writers of English, characters in novels with the same linguistic skills can nonetheless deploy them for either good or ill. Burgess appended a glossary with terms from Jawi, Chinese, Tamil, Punjabi, Urdu and Arabic to his first novel *Time for a Tiger* (1956), which indicates the novel's multilingual dimension. An open attitude to languages other than your own and to their speakers is an index of moral value and is key to the resolution of the novel's plot. In the follow-up work, *A Clockwork Orange* (1962),

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<sup>7</sup> The pioneer is said to be Eva Hoffman. For more on the 'language memoir', see Lennon 123–40.

<sup>8</sup> For example, in *The Cambridge Introduction to Postcolonial Literatures in English* (2007), Innes includes a discussion of Brian Friel's *Translations* and a chapter entitled 'Appropriating the Word: Language and Voice' (97–118). Volume 2 of *The Cambridge History of Postcolonial Literature* (2011) opens with Debjani and Bhekizizwe Peterson's chapter 'The Language Question in India and Africa' (649–702).

however, the best linguist, fluent not only in Nadsat but also in every register of English, is the notorious murderer and rapist Alex, who narrates the tale.

This brief survey has necessarily been selective. Writers such as Muriel Spark, who wrote most of her novels in Italy, Kleist translator John Banville and the Anglo-French bilingual Michele Roberts, for instance, all deserve attention. The following conclusions are preliminary and tentative. It is clear, though, that many authors draw on a wealth of largely concealed language knowledge, assimilating it into English and making other languages and knowledge of them the source of metaphors (Berger, Brookner). As a phenomenon these writers have not been studied systematically under any of the headings in the growing scholarship on multilingual literature, but they share some features with translunguals if their native English becomes defamiliarized to them. Novels in English that represent foreign experience from the inside remain exceptions (Berger, Fitzgerald), as are English novels with frequent quotation of foreign languages (Martel, McCarthy). Experience of abroad, which can make home seem different or strange (Ballard, Carter), is more likely to occur in the writer's youth or the first phase of their career. It can be a spur to writing because it extends powers of empathy, linguistic expression and genre (Berger, Byatt, Fitzgerald, Franzen) through an encounter not only with difference but also self-obliteration and creative redirection (Carter, Mantel). It is less likely, however, to provide material directly and when it does so, it is for a single, lesser work (Farrell, Hollinghurst) or fiction that feeds off twentieth-century war and division (Le Carré). These various factors have contributed to the invisibility hitherto of the 'Modern Languages Novel' in English.

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