

Article

“I Felt Like My Life Had Been Given to Me to Start Over”: Alice Kaplan’s Language Memoir, *French Lessons*

Eleonora Rao

Department of Humanities, University of Salerno, Via Giovanni Paolo II, 132, Fisciano 84084, Italy; erao@unisa.it; Tel.: +39-089-943-7954

Academic Editor: Bernd Fisher

Received: 11 May 2016; Accepted: 14 June 2016; Published: 20 June 2016

Abstract: Alice Kaplan’s memoir *French Lessons* (1993) is a story that deals as much with the issue of language learning as with that of cultural belonging(s). This “language memoir,” as it is typical of this sub-genre, is an intimate tale of the transition between languages and cultures. *French Lessons* recounts her evolving relationship with French language and culture in various phases of her life: starting from childhood, continuing through her graduate student years at Yale and finally as professor of French at Duke. Soon, however, in this unconventional *Bildung*, the second language turns out to be a verbal safe-house, an instant refuge when her first language and culture happen to be too uncomfortable. Ultimately, French provides a psychic space and a hiding place. Ultimately, however, as Derrida has shown, we are alienated from both the first and the second; we find ourselves to be more comfortable in one than in the other. This essay will analyze such processes with special attention to the part played by the body in Kaplan’s building as a student and eventually as a teacher. The analysis will be linked with the text’s peculiar narrative style: fast-paced, with simple, concise sentences, nevertheless extremely effective and moving.

Keywords: autobiography; memoirs; language memoirs; foreigner language teaching/learning

1. Introduction

Alice Kaplan’s *French Lessons: A Memoir*, published in 1993 [1], is a story that deals as much with the issue of language learning as with that of cultural belonging(s). This “language memoir” is an intimate tale of the transition between languages and cultures which falls into the subgenre of so-called autobiographical criticism, personal narrative or confessional criticism that has become quite widespread from the 1990s onward. It was Kaplan herself who coined the expression “language memoir” in an essay, “On Language Memoir,” part of an excellent collection edited by Angelika Bammer, *Displacements: Cultural Identities in Question* [2]. The language memoir can be considered a new critical category of text, a genre whose generic frontier, as Brian Lennon observes, “is marked, possibly expanded, or otherwise modified by an encounter with language as a limit” ([3], p. 124). In *French Lessons* the narrator attempts to relate accounts of experience rather than expertise in language learning. Furthermore, in her dense essay “On Language Memoir,” Kaplan reflects on multiple aspects of learning a second language. First of all, she does not believe that communication or the need to communicate is the principal driving force in the process. As will be discussed in the course of this article, Kaplan opens a radically new scenario on the process of foreigner language learning.

I have always heard it said that people learn languages “in order to communicate” and “out of empathy for others.” I never believed it, because it wasn’t true of my own experience of learning French, and now that I am a French teacher, it isn’t true of my students. “Communication” and “empathy”—such positive altruistic motives—cannot possibly take

into account the variety of contexts in which languages are learnt, the motivations, the emotional tenor of the new and old languages, the way language functions for each personality. Students learn out of desire and fear and greed and a need to escape as much as out of empathy. Language learning is clearly more interesting, and less innocent, than the truism would indicate ([2], p. 60).

In addition, in this essay Kaplan reflects on the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign and on the indissoluble rapport of language to culture. As the author notes,

When I began, I read as many scholarly disquisitions as I could find on second language acquisition—linguistics, sociology, education—and I found methods and statistics and the occasional anecdote, but nothing, really, about what is going on inside the head of a person who suddenly finds herself passionately engaged in new sounds and a new voice, who discovers that “*chat*” is not a cat at all, but a new creature in new surroundings. I wanted to see the “cat,” then the “*chat*.” I wanted the differences between languages to come alive in a dialogue and characterization ([2], p. 59).

French Lessons explores Kaplan’s passion for, if not obsession with, another language and another way of life. In this unconventional *Bildung*, as Lennon has noted, the text presents and problematizes “the entry into the social order of a second, or third (*etc.*) self—of multiple selves, into potentially multiple and coexistent social orders” ([3], p. 126). To return to her essay “On Language Memoirs” where Kaplan looks into the psychological repercussions of living immersed in another language, she observes: “There is no language change without emotional consequences. Principally: loss. That language equals home, that language is a home, and that to be without a language, or to be between languages, is as miserable as to be without bread” ([2], p. 63). In this essay she also recounts her experience of sensing the birth of a new persona: “I hid in my second language, where I leaped out of myself” ([2], p. 60). To speak a foreign language is to depart from one’s self. “Language memoirs are closest in genre to the classic *Bildungsroman*—the novel of education and development. The difference [here] is that it’s not yourself you’re growing into, but another self, perceived as better, more powerful, safer. The change in language is the emblem of a leap into a new persona” ([2], p. 69). In this laborious process of discovery and transformation writing plays a crucial part. Kaplan underscores that she has to find the right form for her memoir. Through the acts of memoir, memory can be rendered into what Kaplan calls “scenes of language” and into writing. This act of writing, Kaplan highlights in *French Lessons*, “isn’t a straight line but a process where you have to get in trouble to get anywhere. Because I was disturbed, it was better writing than any I had done before” ([2], p. 194). She needs to regain contact with her emotions and the writing of the memoir—as it is usually the case with confessional narrative—provides a privileged access, as will be discussed in the course of this essay.

2. In Love with French

French Lessons recounts her evolving relationship with French language and culture in various phases of her life: as a child (after the sudden death of her father, she was sent to boarding school in Switzerland), then as a graduate student at Yale and eventually as professor of French at Duke. Soon, however, the second language turns out to be something more than a skill. It becomes, as John Sturrock notes, “a verbal safe-house, an instant refuge” when her first language and culture happen to be too uncomfortable ([4], p. 2). French provides a psychic space and a place to hide. As the author remarks in the “Afterwards”: “When I was an adolescent, French was my storehouse language. I collected secrets in French; I spoke French to myself. I know now that my passion for French helped me to put off what I needed to say, in English, to the people around me” ([1], p. 214).

Needless to say, the second language learning here is not something undertaken to pass an exam or make sense of a tourist guide. It is a language that becomes second nature, an option or a substitute to the one we were born into. This carries many implications. We are free from clichés, for example, and we are free to express what we could only dream of saying in our native tongue [5]. Ultimately,

however, as Derrida has shown, we are alienated from both the first and the second; we are just happier in one than in the other. According to Jacques Derrida, the only language we speak is not the one we know; instead it is a language of which we have been deprived. Derrida considers the rapport the subject can have with the first or second or third language to be one of “inalienable alienation” which “structures the peculiarity and property of language [...] I have only one language and it is not mine; my ‘own’ language is, for me, a language that cannot be assimilated. My language, the only one I hear myself speak and agree to speak, is the language of the other” ([6], p. 25). Our language is always the language of the other: “We only ever speak one language—and, since it returns to the other, it exists asymmetrically, always for the other, kept by the other. Coming from the other, remaining with the other, and returning to the other” ([6], p. 40). It could be added that for Derrida, the secret of a language is what interrupts it, rendering it a place of opening and reception, a place of an invention which comes from the other, rather than being the creation of a given subject.

Kaplan was born into a Jewish family in Minneapolis, middleclass and rich, although they were first-generation Americans. The father is a charismatic figure for the entire family. He was a successful lawyer involved in the Nuremberg trials of war criminals. Because of this appointment he spends most of his time at home listening to tapes, the relevance of which in relation to Alice the reader finds out towards the end of the text. The Kaplan family, as she says, “had made the transition from diaspora Yiddish to American English in a quick generation. You couldn’t hear the shadow of an accent, unless my grandmother was around” ([1], p. 9).

We spoke American in that house: I can’t reproduce this language, but I know exactly what I mean by it. It was American more for what we talked about than how it sounded, although it is amazing to think that in one generation, a language can become so native, so comfortable, so normal, with no sense whatever of its relative newness: my parents were, after all, the first ones in their families to be born into English ([1], p. 7).

The only member of the family who was a witness of how widely the family had traveled linguistically was her Lithuanian grandmother. In fact, the grandmother in her later years had to be hospitalized, for she was in permanent psychological (and linguistic) confusion caused by the Babel of languages in which she had lived most of her life. The grandmother’s terminally psychotic state is a terrifying prospect for young Alice. Later on, as an adult and professor of French, she surprises herself thinking in French about her nanny’s “sliding from Hebrew to English to Yiddish. Sliding and pushing away bad memories” ([1], p. 13). Of course, she reflects, hers is a different case; nonetheless, Alice is worried by this switching of different languages which she herself does quite often. Therefore, she muses, it “feels disturbed, like hers. French, for me, is not just an accomplishment. It’s a need. I wonder if I could end up like her?” ([1], p. 14).

Kaplan grew up in an America—the America of the 1950s—where the idea of foreignness was alien and remote in a way it will perhaps never be again. In retrospect she remarks: “We were so American” ([1], p. 7). “It seems now,” she adds, “that no one will ever again have that sense of being American that we had then, in the time between the Second World War and Vietnam” ([1], p. 7). In dealing with cultural belonging and cultural differences, Kaplan’s approach is two-fold: on the one hand, it preserves cultural difference; on the other, it points to culture’s heterogeneity and therefore it forms a notion of “collective identity” as, to quote James Clifford, “a hybrid, often discontinuous inventive process” ([7], p. 10). It shows also that when it comes to “cultural difference [...] self-other relations are matters of power and rhetoric rather than essence” ([7], p. 14).

Kaplan only tells what we need to know about herself and her family for her purpose. I would like to highlight here the primary role the body and listening/hearing play in this complex and multipurpose memoir, which recounts the coming of age of an intellectual concerned with the nature and origin of knowledge. Kaplan’s mastery of French will bring about what the narrator describes as an “awakening” which passes first and foremost through the body. At one point, for example, she goes through a kind of anorexic phase: “For each bar of chocolate I didn’t eat I learned a verb/I grew thinner and thinner. I ate French” ([1], p. 53). During one of her visits to Minnesota she is so used to life

outside the US that speaking English again brings about a sensation of disembodiment: “When I spoke I felt like I was outside my own body, listening to someone else, and translating” ([1], p. 70). Right from the start of *French Lessons* the narrator describes her obsession with French-language fluency as an “existential” experience. “I am not writing only about French anymore,” she remarks, “French is the mark of something that has happened to me” ([1], p. 201). This something is a being divided into two languages—selves living two quite separate lives. In fact, from early on in her narrative, this split is staged as a split in the narrator’s proper name itself. She describes the experience of a new self embodied in “my name pronounced French style with the accent on the second syllable, ah-LEASE” ([1], p. 52).

As soon as she lands in America something happens to her body: “I could feel the French sticking in my throat, the new muscles in my mouth” ([1], p. 70). During this stage she is working obsessively to reproduce the perfect French “r”.

It happened over months but it felt like it happened in one class [...] First feeling them wrong, like an impediment, feeling them again and again in their wrongness and then, one day, opening up and letting the right sound come. The “r” was the biggest hurdle: my system was now in place ([1], p. 55).

Mastering the “r” begets a physical and intellectual awakening: “I had found my ability to concentrate. I had woken up from the sleep I had lapsed into on my ninth-grade desk” ([1], p. 56). To her surprise she finds herself to be good at sports. Her body is no longer clumsy. In retrospect she acknowledges this turning point in her life and the salvific role French had assumed in the process:

In February the whole school moved up to a ski town [...] We skied every day [...] We had a slalom race. The gym teacher took a picture of me coming down the course [...] I studied the picture and saw the angle of my skis, a perfect hockey-stop angle, sending up snow spray. At home I was the worst in sports; here miraculously, I was good. I felt like my life had been given to me to start over. French had saved me ([1], p. 57).

Eventually she will become very close to a French family in Bordeaux and will experience a life-long friendship with Micheline, a doctor who, interestingly, specializes in speech problems. “There in Bordeaux is where my mouth and my eyes and my ears for France started to work” ([1], p. 103).

3. The Years at Yale

Kaplan’s description of her graduate studies at Yale in the 1970s is enlightening. Yale under its guiding light, the revered Paul de Man, was at the cutting edge of deconstructionism, which in its turn was the avant-garde of French literary studies. She recalls how De Man showed new ways of reading and how she learned that language can never be trusted with the whole truth. Despite the fascination for de Man, her research interests led her in another direction. In those years of pure textuality she decided to work on Fascist French writers; as she puts it: “I had chosen to work on material that made history impossible to ignore” ([1], p. 160).

There is another non-academic reason for this choice, and it relates to her deceased father, a presence/absence that haunts the text throughout. Kaplan Senior’s involvement in “punishing war criminals” ([1], p. 160) surfaces at various points and Kaplan’s relation to it is pulled together at the very end of the book. It is the absence of her father that she describes as the “force-field within which I had become an intellectual” ([1], p. 197). Her work, her dissertation on French literati who joined forces with the Nazis, permits her to share issues with her father that they were unable to share when he was alive: their Jewish heritage, the trauma of the Holocaust, the persistence of historical memory.

French Lessons can be read, on one level, as a belated elaboration of loss. This reading has been recently carried out by Ursula A. Kelly [8]. Suffice to say here that French can be seen as the language of denial: “I had learned a whole new language at boarding school but it was a language for covering pain, not expressing it” ([1], p. 58). Not only is she (self) exiled from her mother tongue, but Kaplan

represents herself, figuratively, as an outsider from the very beginning, and later as a homeless person and an orphan: “I was afraid to go home, I was afraid of living alone in the big house with my mother who was sick and unhappy, I was dreading the charade of happiness” ([1], p. 58).

In *Losing North*, novelist Nancy Huston (born and educated in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, and then transplanted to France) speaks of foreigners in voluntary exile from their native land and language as people who are inevitably fated to wear a mask in their constant and unrelenting attempts to adapt. Therefore, they will be “involved in *theater, imitation, make-believe*” ([9], p. 19). In her French persona Kaplan feels safe and protected even from herself. She writes of her “desire to be accepted in France and of [her] need for camouflage” ([1], p. 196). On another occasion, on a return visit to the United States, her American self remains alien to her.

In June I took the plane home [...] I had my ear open, on the plane, for the sounds of anyone speaking French, it was holding me up, running through me, a voice in my head, a tickle in my ear, likely to be set off at any moment. A counter language. When I got off the plane the American English sounded loud and thudding—like an insult or a lapse of faith. I would have to go hunting for French sounds, if I wanted to keep going ([1], p. 70).

In many other ways Kaplan describes her love affair with the French language. It is especially through French poetry that she realizes she “could lose [herself] in language” ([1], p. 76). From the academic point of view her results are, of course, excellent; she becomes a French major (beforehand she had chosen political sciences) and her French teacher sends her for a year to France. She stays at first in a small town, Pau, before settling down in Bordeaux. Despite her enthusiasm and her love for the French language, life at this time in France is far from easy. Like any other American student living immersed in another culture, this proves to be far from easy, as the narrator describes the difficulties she experiences during the first half of the year in Part Three: “*Getting It Right*.” But then it will be during the second part of that year in Bordeaux that she will meet Micheline and her family destined to become her lifelong French friends: “They became my French family and I their American friend” ([1], p. 97).

Towards the end of the text, in the “Afterwards,” she admits to herself her necessity of wearing a mask: there she offers, however, more questions than answers:

Why do people want to adopt another culture? Because there’s something in their own they don’t like, that doesn’t *name them* [...] why have I confined myself to teach in this second language, this language which will never be as easy as the first one? Why have I chosen to live in not-quite-my-own-language in exile from myself, for so many years—why have I gone through school with a gag on, do I like not really being able to express myself? ([1], pp. 209–10, emphasis in the original).

It seems, nonetheless, that in and through the second language one can be freed of cliché, and perhaps more importantly, it is only in and through this second language that a moment of illumination may spur. This is Kaplan the professor in her French class:

The simplicity of our communication moves us, we’re outside of cliché, free of easy eloquence, some deeper ideas make it through the mistakes and shine all the more through them. / In French class I feel close, open, willing to risk a language that isn’t the language of everyday life. A sacred language ([1], p. 210).

In class, the reading of Franz Fanon on Algerian women during the revolution creates moments that are “a chance for growth, for freedom, a liberation from the ugliness of our received ideas and mentalities” ([1], p. 211).

4. Scenes of Languages

No doubt, childhood is crucial in this memoir, as it is often the case in the genre. To quote Nancy Huston again: “*Expatriates are consciously (and often painfully) aware of [...] the absolute unique*

nature of childhood, and the fact that it never leaves you" ([9], p. 9). Critics have stressed that the book begins with "scenes of languages" from her childhood. I would add, however, that in *French Lessons* the emphasis falls, first of all, on the act of listening: "Listening now to my childhood as the French Professor I've become, what I hear first are scenes of language" ([1], p. 5). Kaplan's very earliest memories are about her own entry into language, which happens of course through listening. She is three years old and, much to her father's delight, she parrots a funny sentence she does not comprehend: "Everything I like is illegal, immoral, or fattening" ([1], p. 3).

In earlier as well as in later years, hearing, listening and language will thus remain connected. In addition, hearing, according to Michel Foucault, is the only sense we cannot defend ourselves from [10]. Likewise, she cannot defend herself from an infection in her ear she gets from her French boyfriend when she is staying in Bordeaux. The trope of hearing surfaces in the text at many different levels, and first of all in the book's cover. It is a slightly faded photograph of three men sitting at a table, bending over it a little, in concentration: they are listening through headphones. The photo is from the Nuremberg trials—it belonged to her father, who was one of the prosecutors in those "trials of history" ([11], p. 17). Later on in the text Kaplan relates her father's act of listening to her own work. She describes him as "silent and distant with headphones over his ears, [it is] a founding image of my own work" ([1], p. 197). Helen Buss reads *French Lessons* as a trauma text: "Alice Kaplan does not call her book 'trauma' memoir, but I find that an understanding of trauma is essential to my understanding of the form of *French Lessons*" ([12], p. 160). Maybe it is worth stressing the fact that not only had eight-year-old Alice lost her father suddenly, but she also had to face her birthday cake and her father's funeral all in the same day. As Buss continues, "The French language comes along as an opportunity for Kaplan to get on with her life. Yet, given the ambiguity with which trauma acts itself out in a lifetime, the French language ultimately acts as a linguistic location for re-experiencing the trauma of a world in which her father, the man who persecuted evil, is no longer there" ([12], p. 146). According to research on the aftermath of trauma, something positive can be said of its consequences. As Helen Buss reflects, using experts on trauma, such as Kai Erikson, "While trauma is often written about as a site of debilitating illness, it can also be a source of great wisdom and a factor in great achievement. Kai Erikson views the person who has experienced trauma as having access to a special truth: 'Traumatized people calculate life's chances differently. They look at the world through a different lens...They evaluate the data of everyday life differently, read sing differently, see omens the rest of us are for the most part spared'" ([13], p. 194).

Looking back at her childhood in Minnesota, very early in the narrative, the narrating *I* locates herself outside mainstream North American culture and values. She chooses estrangement and exile from her mother country and mother tongue. In narratives of exile there is no *nostos*, no actual return is possible, though paradoxically these narratives are obsessed with 'home' and 'homecomings', elusive and ungraspable as they can be. Possibly writing is the only home there is.

The quality of her writing shares many aspects of diaspora autobiography, as has been argued by Susan Egan in her *Mirror Talk: Genres of Crisis in Contemporary Autobiography*. As Egan argues, one finds

critics and analysts resistant to "pure culture". They move among genres with an imaginative ease that suggests all borders are permeable. Personal information and narrative as well as cultural history are embedded in the ironies of speculations and theory. Theory becomes autobiographical, as do political and cultural commentary, criticism, fiction, poetry, film ([14], p. 122).

Personal narrative, or rather personal criticism, as Mary Ann Caws puts it, "has to do with a willing, knowledgeable, outspoken involvement on the part of the critic with the subject matter, and an invitation extended to the potential reader to participate in the interweaving and construction of the ongoing conversation this criticism can be, even as it remains a text" ([15], p. 2). According to Nancy Miller, personal narratives function more like a relay between positions to create critical fluency: "These autobiographical acts may produce a new repertory for an enlivening cultural criticism" ([16], p. 25). Autobiographical criticism is able to open up a channel from mind to sensations, and it is valuable to

intellectuals who are used to keep emotions to themselves. As Kaplan remarks, “I didn’t realized until I tried to write [*French Lessons*] what an intellectual I had become and how unused I was to expressing emotions” ([17], p. 8). Autobiographical criticism may express “the deep desire of intellectuals not to be intellectual” ([18] p. 182). As Aran Veaser notes in his introduction to *Confessions of the Critics*, “Confessional criticism has the signal virtue of unsettling any certainty that the writer knows that s/he is evoking powerful emotions” ([19], p. xvii). Together with the releasing of emotions, another significant trait in confessional criticism is the importance of secrets. Alice Kaplan told her interviewer Scott Heller “that her book is all about secrets” ([17], p. 9). As the narrator remarks in the “Afterwards”: “There are truths about the past but there is no authority, no policeman, ready and able to pin them down” ([1], p. 231). Besides, the recounting of the past is by necessity partial: the past “can’t be erased” but is destined to remain “always incomplete” ([1], p. 213).

However, Kaplan’s memoir shows also the difficulty in expressing emotions in writing. Kaplan asks interesting questions—“Why I am still fighting the battles of another time and place?” ([1], p. 199), for example—but seems to have little interest in trying to answer to her readers. As Vincent Pecora remarks, “How could she? Who, finally, ever writes the memoir that reveals what must remain hidden?” ([20], p. 79). Pecora continues, “In the end, Kaplan reveals personal feeling of any depth only when it comes to the French language [...] when Kaplan feels most deeply, what she feels most deeply about is French. And this is what is supposed to lend pathos to the final page of the memoir” ([20], p. 81; [21]). The question, however, is not as straightforward as Pecora maintains. Kaplan needs also to express her emotion in English and to issues pertaining to her life in America, in particular her professional life; she is, for example, emotional about her teaching to American students. Research in the experience of communication of emotion with special reference to bilingual subjects stresses what bilingual subjects have always insisted on, and that is the perception of different selves in different languages: in a bilingual subject each language has its own persona, with a different set of cultural norms: “The expression of emotions varies across cultures” ([22], p. 357). There seems, however, to be a preference for a language over another depending on the context and the emotion in question, as research has shown [22]. For example, when Kaplan thinks about her Lithuanian grandmother, who fell into linguistic confusion and had a psychotic break, she is compelled to think about her in French. The narrator concludes that it may be an escamotage to exorcise suffering, to keep pain at bay, since one of her inmost fears is “to end up like her” ([1], p. 14).

It is paramount in this case to regain contact with the language of affect, with the mother tongue. Even though French had a salvific role in a phase of Kaplan’s life, as it was responsible for her “resurrection,” for her “new skin,” ([23], p. 15), English remains the language of “the body’s nocturnal memory,” the language of “the bittersweet slumber of childhood” to quote Julia Kristeva ([23], p. 15).

In Kaplan’s “Foreword” to a new edition of the experimental French author Nathalie Serrault’s memoir *Childhood*, she stresses Serrault’s ability to investigate “the kind of shimmering meaning that lay beneath the most ordinary communication, whether among literary snobs discussing poetry or women shopping” ([24], p. iv). Serrault’s unconventional memoir, written in the form of an internal dialogue, “questions the validity of memoir and then questions that questioning” ([24], p. v). Serrault does not offer any reassurance that what is in the book really happened. Indeed, in her 1956 collection of essays *The Age of Suspicion* [25], she theorizes on the incapacity of language “to reflect so troubled a universe” as the contemporary one ([24], p. vii). When it comes to language and intimate emotions Serrault, and Kaplan with her, ask the same question: “When you write, how do you capture in language, through language, what language doesn’t want to tell you?” ([24], p. vi).

Kaplan’s frequent return to the US on vacation makes her feel a stranger among her peers: “At a lawn party at Mary’s I discovered that my classmates had new rituals: drinking from flasks, smoking pot in the bushes, talking about rock concerts. I felt formal in my tailored white shirt. I stood watching them” ([1], p. 72). Claire Kramsch in an article published in *Transit* reflects on the problematics of personal narratives in a plurilingual context. In “The Multilingual Experience: Insights from Language Memoirs”, she notes: “Language memoirs bring back into public discussion the poetic dimension of

language—a dimension that is likely to better prepare learners to resist the (communicative) pressures of the market and the (cultural) seduction of national communities. What they model are narrators who have assumed their own diversity” ([26], p. 11). In other words, the narrators represent themselves as outsiders.

Starting from her early years in boarding school in Switzerland, and later on as a student of French language, culture and literature during her many long study sojourns in France, Kaplan represents herself as an orphan outsider, and at times an exile. Her return home, which will later result in an academic position as professor of French at a prestigious university, still leaves many questions unanswered. At the end of “On Language Memoir,” she remarks “Why didn't I want to relax with my accent and my mistakes? What was at stake?” ([2], p. 70).

Here, as is often the case, the homecoming is the writing of the memoir itself. The whole text has a few references to its self-begetting, but happily no trace of deconstructionist jargon. Its peculiar narrative style is fast-paced, with simple, concise sentences, nevertheless extremely effective. The book's last two paragraphs are a moving and compelling testimony of an inner intimate need that paradoxically points both to the text's sincerity and to its fictive quality. But then, does it really matter? The passage is worth quoting almost in full:

Why did I hide in French? If life got too messy, I could take off in my second world. Writing about it has made me air my suspicion, my anger, my longings, to people to whom it has come as a total surprise [...] Learning French did me some harm by giving me a place to hide. It's not as if there's a straightforward American self lurking under a devious French one, waiting to come out and be authentic. That's nostalgia—or fiction. French isn't just a metaphor, either—it's a skill. It buys my groceries and pays the mortgage. I'm grateful to French, beyond these material gains, for teaching me that there is more than one way to speak, for giving me a role, for being the home I've made from my own will and my own imagination.

All my life, I've used and abused my gift for language. I'm tempted, down to the last page, to wrap things up too neatly in words ([1], p. 216).

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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