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Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush

IT IS WIDELY to be observed that those wishing, at little effort, to lend a certain intrigue to their English conversation season it with a certain *je-ne-sais-quoi* or some other *soupeçon* of Gallic garniture. Even the introverted Eeyore, on occasion, reaches for the *mot juste*. Eeyore is the old grey donkey who lives in a corner of a field that is forever England in A. A. Milne's stories about Winnie-the-Pooh and friends. In chapter 6 of *Winnie-the-Pooh*, it is Eeyore's birthday, a fact that his friends have all forgotten. When Pooh Bear chances upon Eeyore and wishes him a good morning, Eeyore doubts that it *is* a good morning, hinting darkly: 'We can't all, and some of us don't. That's all there is to it.' Pooh asks Eeyore to explain. The old grey donkey offers the following list of equivalent words and phrases: 'Gaiety. Song-and-dance. Here we go round the mulberry bush.' A puzzled Pooh asks, 'What mulberry bush is that?'; in response to which the donkey merely continues his variations on the theme: "'Bon-hommy," went on Eeyore gloomily. "French word

meaning bonhommy,” he explained. “I’m not complaining, but There It Is.”¹

Et voilà: There It Is, indeed, the French word that bursts into flower in the midst of the most English sentence. A word of conspicuously French derivation serves Eeyore’s purposes well. It would be too painful for him to name in plain English the simple happiness of being alive that the irrepressible Pooh clearly possesses that morning and which the old grey donkey can’t and doesn’t, at the best of times, but especially when it is his birthday and They have all Forgotten. Instead, Eeyore names obliquely the capacity for happiness that is denied him, alluding to popular English rhymes that speak of it and producing synonyms that name it. He brilliantly introduces the last of these synonyms, *bon-hommy*, as a French word possessing the meaning of the selfsame word in English. He thereby specifies that meaning as evident to the likes even of Pooh Bear, while using the Frenchness of the word to emphasize its distance from himself, the discontented grey English donkey. His single-word code mixing of French in English at once connects him to, and separates him from, French ways of saying and being.

Eeyore’s flourishing of *bon-hommy* is an act of expressive indirection that reveals much about the history of English in its centuries-old relation with French. An equally revealing, if unconscious, act lies at the heart of a story widely told of the forty-third president of the United States of America. George W. Bush was said to have remarked, in July 2002, to his closest ally in international politics, the UK prime minister Tony Blair, that ‘the problem with the French is that they don’t have a word for entrepreneur’. Whether or not the anecdote is true—and its truth is disputed—matters less, for our purposes, than the fact that it struck a chord with so many people. It circulated at a time of strain in relations between the governments of the three nations, which were taking up different positions in the crisis

that eventually saw the UK join the US-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003, opposed by France. The anecdote showed the Anglo-American alliance, in the shape of its leader, revealing—even in the act of denigrating the irksome French—how much the alliance owed to French language and culture. It suggested that many, in the English-speaking world, turn to French much more than they would like to think they do.²

We live at a time when the linguistic traffic is, in general, moving much more heavily from English into French than in the contrary direction. After the British empire spread English across the world in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the USA entrenched English as a global lingua franca in the twentieth century, causing the unprecedented amount of lexical borrowing from English that is currently taking place in French and other languages.

This situation ought not to be allowed to conceal a longer and more complex story of linguistic and cultural interaction. Anglophones have borrowed words from French, as Eeyore did consciously and George W. Bush (it seems) did unconsciously, for centuries. More words have entered English from French than from any other modern foreign language. These French words may be said to have ‘turned’ English in more ways than one. Most have become naturalized. They have done so by means of a process of adoption that is as old as the English language itself, and so thorough that the speaker of English often retains little or no sense of their foreign provenance. It may come as a surprise to many readers, for example, that each of the nouns in the very first sentence of this book—not just *je-ne-sais-quoi*, *souçon*, and *garniture*, as might be expected, but also *intrigue*, *conversation*, and *effort*—would have struck seventeenth-century English speakers as a floridly French foreignism. It is a curious fact of linguistic history that while English has fully naturalized many such words, some have over

the centuries visibly retained signs of their foreign derivation, eluding translation and resisting naturalization. They may carry traces of their French roots in their pronunciation and spelling. They are often set in italic type to distinguish them from the English surrounding them. They lend English a French twist. They are, we might say, French non-natives in the midst of the language we Anglophones use. For that reason, I propose to use the name for such people that English has (in characteristically magpie fashion) borrowed from French, and to call them *émigrés*.³

In this book I explore the varied lives that such *émigrés* have led. What role, I ask, have they played in the making of modern English? To what extent have they, in their migrations, revealed or changed important aspects of the French linguistic and cultural setting that first shaped them? And what does the study of these words in migration reveal of the fertile but fraught relationship that England and France have long shared, and that now entangles English- and French-speaking cultures all over the world?

In what follows, I argue that *émigrés* have played an important and largely neglected role in the making of modern English as it is spoken and written in many parts of the Anglophone world today, and has been for centuries. I proceed by drawing together, and then working outwards from, a small cluster of phrases and terms with visibly French roots—*à la mode*, *galanterie*, *naïveté*, *ennui*, and *caprice*—that came to prominence as Charles II and his court, in the period 1660–85, were Frenchifying English language and culture. These are words that retain their *émigré* status to this day. I explore what meanings and associations they bring with them from French. I place their emergence in Restoration English in the wider context of social and cultural change. I then follow their migration across time and space to examine specific prominent

instances over the last three centuries or more in the Anglophone cultures of North America, the Caribbean, India, and Ireland, as well as Britain. I draw evidence of the usage and meanings of my chosen words from dictionaries and other lexicographical sources. I analyse this evidence alongside instances in literature, film, the visual arts, and music, covering aspects of culture and society that range from opera to ice cream. In this way, I examine how the Anglophone migrations of these words relate to their continuing lives and adventures in French, and I explore in particular what the words mean in—and say about—modern English.

Having taken the Frenchification of Restoration English as my initial focus, I set this development of the language in the wider context of social and cultural change. The two most prominent seventeenth-century English importers of the *émigrés* examined in this book—the polymath John Evelyn (1620–1706) and the playwright John Dryden (1631–1700)—transferred into England from France, along with these words, larger-scale cultural ideas and forms: Evelyn proposes that an English equivalent of the Académie française should create a grammar and rhetoric for the English language; Dryden—in his play *Marriage À-la-Mode*—draws freely upon the most successful modern French dramatic forms even as he satirizes the fashion for Frenchified English among London’s social climbers of the late seventeenth century.

I pay particularly close attention to episodes in the Anglophone migrations of French-derived words when the word in question occurs prominently in the work of artists—writers, of course, but also painters and composers—for whom the use of language is a matter of primary importance. Language, as such artists find it, is no different from what it is for other users of the language. What the artists add to the language they use, however, is an extra edge of consciousness about such matters

as the choice of words and their arrangement. I view a word as occurring prominently in the work of these artists when it is sported as the *mot juste* and placed in a position of display, by, for example, being used to name the topic around which an entire work of art is organized, or by figuring in the title of a work.

One example I have mentioned, and to which I return at regular intervals in this book, is Dryden's play *Marriage À-la-Mode* (first published in 1673). Dryden, in that play, satirized French with a forked tongue. He helped the émigré words, whose over-enthusiastic English uses he mocked, to find a lasting place in the language. He explored for his own purposes the questions that such words have always raised about the people who trade in them. These are overwhelmingly questions of identity and affiliation. Who is it that can call upon a word or phrase of foreign derivation in the course of their ordinary linguistic business? Or can understand others who do the same? What do the multilingual transactions of such people say about their place in the social hierarchy, their access to education and culture, and their religious and political loyalties? Dryden's plays ask what such questions mean for the elite of a country, Restoration England, whose society and culture were marked by religious and political conflict.

I examine, in what follows, works of art that return to these questions in quite other times and settings. In his 1971 novel *The Naive and Sentimental Lover*, the English novelist John Le Carré (b. 1931) satirizes the insularity of twentieth-century English middle-class manners by revisiting imaginatively the decisive contribution that the German essayist Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805) made to the meaning of *naive* in 1795, when he paired it with a second foreign word in German, *sentimental*. From the title of her 1809 novel *Ennui* onwards, the Anglo-Irish writer Maria Edgeworth (1768–1849) draws upon the international prestige and analytic power of French language and

literary culture in her moral dissection of fashionable life and the state of relations between England and Ireland at the time of their political union. The Canadian novelist George Bowering (b. 1935) exploits the title of his 1987 novel *Caprice* on several levels. The title carries the name of the novel's heroine. It says something about the way in which she manages her predicament. And it is a description of the novel itself, an ingenious remake of the western novel that pits a poetry-loving and bullwhip-toting heroine from Quebec against murderous American outlaws, under the quizzical gaze of two native Indians. It is, in other words, a border-crossing postcolonial Canadian caprice.

Episodes such as these, I suggest, mark in each case a new release of the word's conceptual energies and a remaking of its place in the vocabulary of English. They shed light on the complexity of a process that tends to draw two or more languages and cultures into contact with English: in addition to French, for example, Latin in the making of *à la mode*, Italian in the mixing of *caprice*, and German in the migration of *naïve*. They show how that contact between languages and cultures exposes situations of inequality even as it creates new migrant forms of lucidity and expression. And they reveal the particular contradictions that come about as these new forms encounter the entrenched cultures of Anglophone insularity and isolationism.

Such contradictions beset the long history of the English reception of French émigré words. These words inspire admiration in some Anglophones, revulsion in others, and ambivalence in most. They can be reactivated in ways that occasion extraordinary creativity; they even come, at times, to be synonymous with creativity itself; and yet, at the same time, they remain visibly caught up in a power relation between neighbouring cultures that is never perceived as equal. Their Anglophone migrations are often a matter of apparent indifference

to guardians of the French language in metropolitan France. Yet these migrations draw the words into spirals and loops of relational development. At times, these émigrés visibly accompany words that have travelled from English into French, acting as their shadows or secret sharers. They are never the same again for having been abroad.

How, in this context, might we best understand the complex history—the transcultural entanglement and creative possibilities—of French words that have turned English? I offer, by way of an answer, the conjecture that this history is best understood as a specific instance of a wider process of creolization. In so doing, I take forward the work that various scholars have published over the last decade or so on relations between English and French, and between England and France, in medieval Europe. That work has shown how, from the Norman conquest of England in 1066 through the age of Chaucer to the time of Shakespeare, the language the English spoke mingled with French, and how this development divided opinion in an England marked by the experience of colonial domination at the hands of the Normans.⁴

I draw inspiration from this body of work even as I extend its scope by shifting the focus to the early modern period and beyond. I explore a time in which the English, once colonized, turned colonizers; and when the language of an imperial nation slowly spread to the four corners of the globe. This historical development brings me to the concept of creolization. That concept has become important to the study of the Caribbean, as a way of understanding the colonizing process practised by the powers of Europe; but it has yet to be considered for its shaping of cultural relations within Europe over centuries. I aim to help fill that gap in *Émigrés* and, in so doing, to contribute to the development of creolization as a conceptual model. My contribution involves significantly adapting that model to

a specific instance of translingual and transcultural mixing, which started in early modern England before spreading to other Anglophone countries, thereby reflecting in miniature the development of English in colonial and postcolonial cultures all over the world.

How, then, is creolization best adapted to account for the specific situation of émigré words in modern, global English? My answer to that question involves bringing the concept, as articulated by Caribbean intellectuals such as Édouard Glissant (1928–2011) and Stuart Hall (1932–2014), into contact with the study of keywords as pioneered by Raymond Williams (1921–88). Williams explored particular English words relating to what, as we will see, he called ‘the central processes of our common life’. He put the trajectories through history of these words at the centre of an inquiry marked by a quiet political radicalism. He did so by composing, in his *Keywords* (1976), a vocabulary of modern British culture and society. In *Émigrés*, I maintain Williams’s simultaneous focus on language in history and on language as history in the area of culture and society. But I look beyond British English, unlike Williams, and I contend that his vocabulary of culture and society lacks one category of keywords, namely, those of conspicuously foreign derivation. I argue for that category’s necessary inclusion in any such vocabulary of modern global English.

I offer the émigrés examined in this book as a handful of examples of what would need to be added. Quite why a particular word first becomes key is often hard to say, of course, but there are various signs that this is happening. It may receive a cluster of definitions in a more or less concerted act of conceptualization. Such conceptualization can be more, or less, harmonious, of course, and it is often the case that a word emerges as key not because it encapsulates a single vision but, rather, because it acts as a visible site of encounter and conflict

between different ways of seeing culture and society. *À la mode*, I suggest, both captures the fascination with, and betrays some of the fear that many in the English-speaking world entertain towards, the influence of French culture and society. I devote the first two chapters of this book to exploring *à la mode* because I describe, in these chapters, the historical moment at which not only that phrase, but all of the émigrés that interest me here, settled in English. My particular suggestion about *à la mode* is that, as it entered seventeenth-century English, it provoked debate about what it meant to be English.⁵ Key to that debate was the complex English reception of a second émigré, *galanterie*, which denoted a model of elegant cultural and social interaction that France both invented and exported. The mixing of French in Restoration English thus revealed attitudes towards foreign cultures and their mediators at a time when to be French meant, in Britain, nothing more nor less than to be foreign. I argue that most native Britons viewed the foreignness of French as religious in nature, as well as political, and—given the long and continuing history of Franco–British wars—actually or potentially hostile in intent. At the same time, they tended to admire France as possessing a superior culture of elegance and refinement, especially if they had experienced some exposure to it. The result of these contrasting views was an ambivalence that lasts, at least in some parts of British society, to this day.

The essays of Part Two, devoted to *naïveté*, *ennui*, and *caprice*, may each be considered as a distinct exploration of a French émigré. If read together, however, they constitute an experiment in a form of cosmopolitan criticism that focusses on languages in migration and the specificities of their cultural entanglements. These essays are connected by the strands of an argument: that émigrés complete English as a language, as it were, by elegantly recalling its fundamental incompleteness.

They reveal its reliance on the languages that surround it. They refuse, by their unassimilated status and their deviation from the norm, to participate in the illusion that English—and, by extension, any language—could hope to express everything of the world that falls within human experience. They mark out its constitutive problems, even as they create new possibilities, of expression. *Naïveté*, as I construe it, has long enabled its English users to point to one such problem of expression, by placing the innocence of which the word speaks at a distance from their experience. It thereby highlights English ways of saying and being as caught up in an asymmetrical entanglement with a French culture and society viewed as superior. *Ennui*, which reflects that same entanglement, has come to be paired in English with native synonyms such as *boredom*. By remaining a markedly foreign element in such pairings, the French word has retained the capacity to suggest that the experience of which it speaks is itself elusively foreign, that it threatens to invade and exhaust all human activity. The creole hybrids that *ennui* has formed in such pairings inhabit a zone in which not only neighbouring languages, but also art forms, come into contact as they attempt to meet that threat. *Caprice* has thrived in the same contact zone and personifies its deviant creativity. It shows this creativity to be in conflict with the powers of hierarchization, of control and resistance, that accompany its historical manifestations. It thereby acts as a figure for all of the émigrés that appear in this book.

I treat these particular words as points of access into a wider exploration of the processes of translingual and transcultural migration. This, then, is a book about translation and its other. It measures the losses and gains in meaning that accompany the translated word, of course, but above all it illuminates the *untranslated* word in its movement between languages and its powers of cultural transformation. To existing studies I bring

an approach that is methodologically innovative, in that it yokes together keywords and creolization, two concepts hitherto unrelated in the scholarship.⁶ Once combined with due care and rigour, I contend, these concepts make unique sense of the processes of translingual and transcultural migration, specifically, as these have entangled and enriched English and French language and culture in history. For they show untranslated French words, not only turning English, but making it anew. Insofar as English has been made and made anew by being mixed with migrant words, I argue in what follows, it may be invited to take its place among other creoles. This creolizing process has, by now, long since moved to Anglo-French contact zones all over the world. Yet it first emerged in the long and unequal entanglement of England with its nearest continental European neighbour, the country that so many in England fear to love and love to hate, even as they stand in the corner of a field of thistles and take a turn, in French, around the mulberry bush.

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As elsewhere in the book, I italicize in this index words that are discussed primarily as words, while adopting in all other situations the type face—either roman or italic—standardly used for the word in English (as per *OED*). Some entries list instances where the main entry word is treated as a word alongside instances where it is treated in other ways. In such cases, the main entry word is set in the type face—either roman or italic—standardly used for that word, and subentries are used to distinguish the various treatments it receives.

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