

Reculer Pour Mieux Sauter: Towards a Pattern in the Work of Four Minority Language Literature Writers

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As a comparative study of four minority language literatures, this article offers an analysis of the work of four vanguard writers. The study is undertaken from Casanova's perspective that work written in minority languages by authors originating from late nineteenth or early twentieth century emergent nations should be regarded as "littératures combattives". Following the analysis of their early works written, the strategies of Frisian author Kalma, Welsh playwright Lewis, Scots poet MacDiarmid and Breton writer Hemon are compared. The study argues that the four authors had to take a step backwards in order to leap forward into the post-Great War era.

Keywords: Minority language literature, Comparative literature, Pascale Casanova, Douwe Kalma, Saunders Lewis, Hugh MacDiarmid, Roparz Hemon

Introduction

During and shortly after the Great War, the emergence of new states in Europe, such as Ireland and Iceland, ignited hopes in the hearts of various lesser-used language writers regarding the sovereignty of their so-called "peripheral" regions and the status of their languages. The languages referred to are non-state languages used by indigenous peoples who may and often do represent the majority of a population in a certain region of a state.

Several groups of people, who identified themselves as nations, became citizens of new states after 1918, notably in the East of Europe. Some of those groups got the opportunity, after international recognition of their states, to formalize their linguistic rights.

The key figure behind the creation of these new nation states was United States President Woodrow Wilson. His famous *Fourteen Points*, presented on the 8th of January 1918, constituted the principles for world peace that were to be used for the peace negotiations to end World War I.

The hopes of lesser-used language writers to be able to express themselves in officially recognized languages were strengthened by Wilson's address to Congress on the 11th of February 1918, in which he responded to the German and Austrian reactions to his *Fourteen Points*:

Peoples are not to be handed about from one sovereignty to another by an international conference or an understanding between rivals and antagonists. National aspirations must be respected; peoples may now be dominated and governed only by their own consent. "Self-determination" is not a mere phrase. It is an imperative principle of actions which statesmen will henceforth ignore at their peril (Wilson, 1918).

Although Woodrow Wilson's intention was to dissociate the war from nationalistic disputes or ambitions, the result of the redefinition of the state boundaries in Europe by the peace treaties and the League of Nations, in which the United States did not participate, did not mean that nationalistic disputes were resolved to everybody's satisfaction. In contradiction to the League's mission, the Allied and Associated Powers states refused to recognize the self-determination rights for different groups that comprised a section of those states (Barth 2008).

Minority literature writers

In the post-Great War turmoil several vanguard minority literature writers saw the opportunity to give more autonomy to the literary field of their languages and to give special significance to their literatures, since the dominating cultures of Europe had failed to prevent the outbreak of the most disastrous war the world had ever witnessed.

The four writers selected for the case studies are Douwe Kalma (1896-1953) from Frisia, Saunders Lewis (1893-1985) from Wales, Hugh MacDiarmid (pseudonym of Christopher Murray Grieve, 1892-1978) from Scotland and Roparz Hemon (pseudonym of Louis-Paul Nemo, 1900-1978) from Brittany, all from Northwest European countries with a more or less similar democratic outlook. The regions these writers originated from can be regarded as more or less comparable with respect to their dependency on a central government during the interwar years, and their peripheral position, politically, socially and culturally. They published in Frisian, Welsh, Scots and Breton, minority languages "unique" in the sense that they are not majority languages in other (neighbouring) states. They were all contemporaries, born in the last decade of the nineteenth century. In encyclopaedic works and literary history books they have been described as leading men of letters, strongly advocating and stimulating the use of their languages as languages of culture.

Perspective

After the Great War, many intellectuals shared the view that Western civilization was doomed and that all forms of literary and artistic expression had failed. New forms of expression were sought: preconceived ideas about religion and tradition were questioned. Although signs of Modernism, not only in the visual arts, but also in literature, such as Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's *Futurist Manifesto* (1909), can be found in the pre-Great War period, an explosion of modernist art manifested itself after 1918. In terms of literature, one can cite writers such as Franz Kafka, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot James Joyce and Virginia Woolf.

However, contemporary literature written in lesser-used languages did not seem to be part of that modern world republic of letters. Writers expressing themselves in those languages often felt ignored and perceived that the regions in which they were living or originated from were frequently stigmatized as being backward and provincial, or pleasantly picturesque at best. However,

those writers did not want their languages to end up “in a sort of museum department of [human] consciousness” (MacDiarmid, 1923). They interpreted the appreciation of their languages, for historical and sentimental reasons only, as a kiss of death.

The promises about self-determination for small nations made during the Great War had led to high expectations. Some of the minority literature writers aimed to modernize and internationalize the literature written in their languages. They realized that, if they were to gain more respect and official recognition for their languages, they should also strive for a higher degree of autonomy and, if as yet non-existent, a separate field for their literature, one not subsumed under a hegemonic literature. In their struggles they formulated dreams and visions, but they also used tactics and strategies.

In this article, the question as to what the aforementioned four writers did to put their literatures on the international map is approached from the perspective provided by the French literary critic and researcher Pascale Casanova. She argues that those literatures should be regarded as “littératures combatives” (Casanova, 2011), contending that the minority language literatures of the small emergent nations of early twentieth century Europe reflect struggles which are both political and literary, and that the politics in question takes the quasi-systematic form of the defence of the nation.

Strategies

After examination of the early work of the four authors, including pamphlets and manifestos as well as one substantial literary text published by each of them (*Kening Aldgillis* [King Aldgillis] by Douwe Kalma, 1920; *Blodeuwedd* [The Woman Made of Flowers] by Saunders Lewis, 1923-1925; *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* by Hugh MacDiarmid, 1926 and *Eun Den a Netra* [A Man of Nothing] by Roparz Hemon, 1927) four kinds of strategies were identified: distancing, connecting, unifying and mobilizing (for an extensive analysis of these works cf. Krol, 2018).

All four authors employ strategies to distance themselves from the dominating language(s), the influences from the dominating language(s) and culture(s) and the eighteenth and nineteenth century literature in their own languages, much of which they saw as a Romantic product, deliberately dissociated from any political reality. On the other hand, they clearly connected themselves to non-dominant cognate or kindred languages and cultures. The Frisian author Douwe Kalma, for example, was eager to connect the Frisians with the English and Scandinavians. The Welsh author Saunders Lewis sought to connect Welsh culture with French authors such as Maurice Barrès and Paul Claudel. Hugh MacDiarmid, the Scot, emphasized the Auld Alliance with the French, but also wanted to renew old Celtic connections. He was convinced, moreover, that the combination of the typical spirit of the Scots and the genius of the Russians, especially Dostoevsky’s creative power, could prove essential to the redemption of post-World War I civilization. The Breton Hemon was anxious to publish Breton works in Esperanto, which he saw as a medium that could further international understanding. He approached representatives

from other small nations to combine forces in order to gain more international recognition for minority language literature.

In addition, the four writers connected themselves to the period in which, according to them, their languages were used in practically every domain of life, viz. the late Middle Ages. All four emphasize that their languages have a great heroic past. Before their nations were dominated by other powers, their languages thrived in all spheres of life and the Welsh and the Scots author stress that their literatures flourished during that time. Moreover, before the Reformation, cultural contacts in Europe were easier, since the peoples of Europe shared the same Roman-Catholic tradition and the same lingua franca. The writers from Wales and Scotland argue that, after the loss of independence of their nations, their literatures declined and that contacts with cultural centers on the Continent became more difficult due to restrictions of the hegemonic power as well as inhibitions imposed upon the Scottish and Welsh people by the religious authorities. However, while the Frisians and Scots experienced negative effects of the introduction of the Dutch and English Bibles (*Statenvertaling* [States Translation], 1637 and the *King James / Authorized Version*, 1611) on their languages, the Welsh appreciate the positive effects of the early translation of the Bible in Welsh (William Morgan, 1588). The complete Frisian Bible translation by G. A. Wumkes was not published until 1943; a complete Breton Bible translation by Jean François Le Gonidec appeared 1866; and a complete Bible translation in Lowland Scots does not exist although the New Testament, translated by William Lorrimer was published in 1983.

The four writers all decided to *reculer pour mieux sauter*. They journeyed back to the distant past in order to make a substantial leap forward. Douwe Kalma glorified the era of the Frisian kings Redbad and Aldgillis. Lewis delved into old Welsh mythology to connect the past with the present. MacDiarmid's slogan was "Not Burns – Dunbar!", to get away from popular sentimentalism and to find new inspiration in the language of pre-Renaissance poets. Roparz Hemon translated medieval Celtic texts into modern Breton.

Lewis and MacDiarmid in particular connected to modern, contemporary texts preferably from what they perceived as kindred, non-dominating languages. MacDiarmid's texts in particular abound with references to and interpolations from non-English texts.

Among the unifying strategies of the authors the urge to unite the nation is most prominent. Douwe Kalma regarded the Frisians in the Netherlands and the Frisians in Germany as one people. MacDiarmid treated the inhabitants of Scotland, even though speaking different languages, as one people, and Lewis and Hemon intended to unite the inhabitants of Wales and Brittany by educating them in one language: Welsh and Breton respectively.

In addition, the authors urged their compatriots to unify the language. Douwe Kalma rejected dialectal variation in the written form of Frisian. Both Lewis and Kalma wanted their languages to have an elevated register so that people would not consider it an inferior medium of expression. MacDiarmid did not want to unify the language. Instead he proposed to extend Scots with Gaelic and other non-English words, in such a way that it could both reflect

the genius of Scottish nationality as well as serve as a medium of intellectual expression. Recognizing dialectal variation, Roparz Hemon eventually developed a scheme to forge the four main varieties of Breton into one language, idiomatically as well as orthographically.

All four authors considered a sense of national consciousness as a necessary condition, not only in themselves but in their fellow-countrymen if they were to emancipate the regions in which they lived from repression. Consequently, they felt that they had to mobilize their fellow-authors and, with the help of literary media, people with literary interests or the literary inclined. In their view, their fellow-language speakers could also be mobilized by all kinds of linguistic arts. Plays, such as *Kening Aldgillis* and *Blodenwedd*, for example, proved how people could get more involved in national culture.

Although all four authors agreed that the cultural predicament of their region was not only a question of aesthetics, but also of economics, only three of them became involved in a political party: Kalma, Lewis and MacDiarmid. Both Saunders Lewis and Hugh MacDiarmid helped found a nationalist party, and Douwe Kalma wrote the political manifesto for the Christian-Democratic Union, a small left-wing Protestant political party in the Netherlands. Convinced that the Breton state would take care of itself after it had adopted Breton as its language, Roparz Hemon committed himself to a political aim without becoming a member of a political party.

“Double bind”

Writers stand in a particular relation to world literary space by virtue of the place occupied in it by the national space into which they are born (Casanova, 2004). They have to deal with that space, its past and its present. They can reject their national heritage, affirm it, or transform it. If the space into which writers are born is multilingual, they are faced with a choice.

The choice faced by the four authors can be characterized as a “double bind” (Gray, 1983). A choice for the native, minority language meant that it represented a medium affording to give direct expression to one’s genius and experience. It would tend to be regarded as an authentic expression. But, on the other hand, it would risk neglect by the dominant cultural centers and therefore receive no consecration by the highest cultural authorities. A choice for the non-native, majority language would give potential access to the dominant cultural centers and potential consecration. Its disadvantage would be that it would give indirect expression of one’s genius and experience and would risk being regarded as inauthentic.

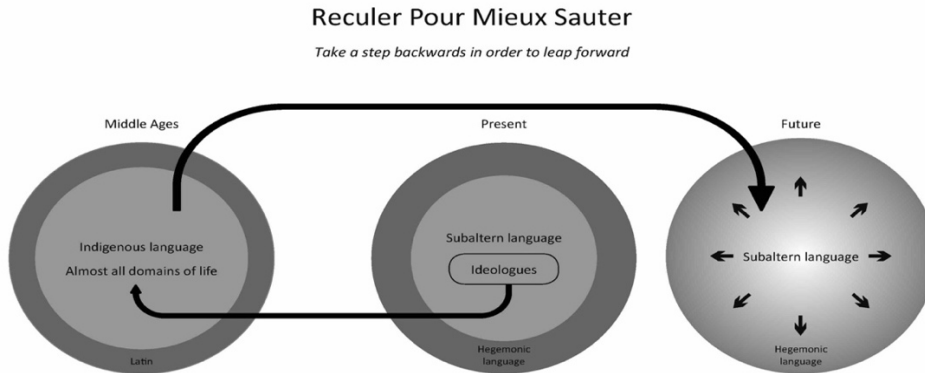
Reculer Pour Mieux Sauter

The affirmation of the linguistic heritage by vanguard authors writing in minority languages, fused with the desire to modernize and internationalize, strengthened a pattern which can be tentatively summarised by the French phrase *reculer pour mieux sauter*.

Committed to their linguistic identity, the authors felt more or less compelled to go back to the distant past of their languages, before they were able to make a substantial leap forward. Their desire to preserve the character

of their languages as well as to extend the use of them in domains where they had hitherto scarcely been employed made the jump into the past inevitable.

Figure 1. *Reculer Pour Mieux Sauter*



To enable their languages to be used in elevated and modernistic registers and domains other than the familiar ones and to expand their languages with adequate vocabulary, they resorted to the past of their own languages or to cognate or kindred languages other than those which dominated their own. Thereby, they were able to add status to their languages, but they also risked alienation, ridicule and incomprehension from the fellow speakers of their languages. In this respect minority language writers concerned with the character or purity of their languages differ from their fellow authors writing in hegemonic languages where the unavailability of adequate vocabulary and the risk of misunderstanding hardly present themselves.

Linguacultures

Hugh MacDiarmid’s ‘synthetic Scots’, as a limitless combination of old and new words, archaisms and neologisms, preferably based on Scots or Gaelic, but not restricted to those languages, can be regarded as a means to overcome the “double bind”. However, this use of Scots was hardly taken up by any of his fellow-poets, even those sympathetic to it, and remained largely idiosyncratic. The other three authors also alienated themselves from their fellow language speakers to a certain degree by their use of language. Kalma’s was characterized as “non-quotidian” and “elevated”; the language of Lewis’s plays was referred to as “High Welsh” and Roparz Hemon’s linguistically unifying use of the language was seen as “Breton chimique” [chemical Breton]. The combative stance and the main strategies of the four authors were thus reflected in the use of their languages.

The transformation of their languages and literatures was, however, no mere revisionism, albeit that the older stages of their languages provided the resources

required to preserve the characteristics of the old languages in their expanded new ones. In their drive to transform their languages, MacDiarmid and Hemon, and to a lesser extent Kalma and Lewis, did not seem to be much concerned by what Michael Agar has termed distinct “languacultures”, the connection between language and culture, “the situation of use” of certain words and sentences (Agar 1994).

Dialogic Internationalism

Work containing this innovative elevation and expansion of the language frequently evoked a sense of unease among its readers because of its artificial literarity. Moreover, it caused a divisiveness that has continued to exist ever since and can be regarded as a feature of those languages (cf. for Frisian: Poortinga, 1965; for Welsh and Scots: Brown, Ramage and Sherlock 2000; for Breton: Timm 2002). On the one hand there are those who think that the written variety of their language should closely resemble the spoken variety as it is conceived by them and, on the other hand, those who advocate expansion and renewal of the written variety of their languages.

In the recreation of their languages and literatures the four writers were combatively selective. To justify the *raison d'être* of their literatures they emphasized the potentialities and the normality of their otherness and, where necessary, sharply delineated their languages and the fields of their literatures from those dominating their own, purposefully and paradoxically making the past present in their work. They insisted on the relevance of their languages and literatures in the post-Great War World as vigorously creative ‘bridge-building’ alternatives to languages and cultures that had failed. Demonstrating tremendous zeal and conscious of making their languages and literatures more comprehensive as well as aiming at cultural exchange, they opposed assimilation into the hegemonic culture, preferring “dialogic internationalism” to “monologic universalism” (Biti, 2014).

Counter to most of the majority language writers, the four minority language authors deemed it inevitable that, with respect to literary activities, they had to occupy themselves with more than the sole task of writing literature. They also had to take care of other, more mundane aspects of it, such as its promotion, distribution and reception. All four writers contributed to the creation of more distinctly separate, national literary fields, thus putting their literatures more firmly on the international map. However, it goes beyond the scope of this article to enumerate the long list of organizations, associations, magazines and periodicals they managed to found in a comparatively short time, but all those activities demonstrated a tremendous zeal to emancipate themselves from what they considered a repressive system.

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