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MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE? THE PROBLEM WITH COMPARATIVE STYLISTICS

GILLES PHILIPPE

[69] There seems to be no such thing as comparative literary stylistics. Even the largest congresses of comparative literature offer no panel on stylistic matters. Although "closer reading of style" should "form the bedrock of comparative [70] literature,"¹ literary comparatists have, by tradition, rarely been interested in linguistic questions or simply afraid to tackle them, and their interest in stylistic matters has even been weakened by the recent rise of cultural and social concerns in literary studies. As to stylisticians, they usually work on one literary tradition and fail to take into account the possible developments of the same phenomena in corpora written in languages other than their own.

There are of course a number of academic papers that offer studies pertaining to comparative literary stylistics, but they are often translation-oriented or they focus on narrow corpora, two novels, for instance, or two writers. In the second part of this necessarily brief presentation, I shall also take a very narrow question as a study case: how and why can T. S. Eliot's ideal prose style be described as "un-French." But I will start with some general considerations on the challenges that comparative literary stylistics has to take up. Using three very different examples, I will try to show that many stylistic questions raised by literary texts written in different languages cannot be answered within the sole framework of contrastive linguistics.

¹ BEN HUTCHINSON, *Comparative Literature. A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018, p. 40.

Comparative stylistics vs. comparative literary stylistics

If there seems to be no such thing as *comparative literary stylistics*, there is such a thing as *comparative stylistics*, but it is a branch of contrastive linguistics. It aims at explaining why, for instance, when two phrasings are equally acceptable in Italian and Spanish, Italian natives will spontaneously select the one with this or that sentence-building, while Spanish speakers will opt for the other one. The keyword here is *expressivity*, and most of the time, the explanation is expected to be found in the differing “geniuses of the languages” reflecting the different *Volksgeister*, or national characters. As Vinay and Darbelnet put it in the introduction of their now classic textbook of translation: “comparative stylistics [...] relies on two particular viewpoints of life which inform these languages or which result from them”²: compared to the French language, English tends to prefer verbs to nouns, synthetic wordings to analytical ones, etc., because English-speakers are supposedly down-to-earth people, whereas French-speakers are popularly thought to have a more abstract mindset. Such national specificities are not mirrored by different conceptions of comparative stylistics though. In Germany and in German too, for instance, *Vergleichende Stilistik* also refers to a sub-branch of contrastive linguistics (“Vergleichende Stilistik gehört in den Bereich der Sprachvergleichung”³) and/or to a sub-branch of translation studies (“Die Vergleichende Stilistik ist Teil der Übersetzungswissenschaft”⁴).

[71] Paradoxically enough, comparative stylistics might be the first obstacle comparative literary stylistics has to overcome. The latter demands indeed that we keep in mind that authors do not write because they have been speaking their native idioms, but because they have been reading books in their mother tongues. They do not only write in a language, they write at a certain point of development of national literary practices. In addition to the requirement to comply with the rules and make do with the limits of their working languages (English nouns have no gender, the English tense system is different from the Romance one, its resultative constructions are unparalleled in any language, etc.), their writing habits are modeled on stylistic patterns that they reproduce or reject.

Allow me to illustrate this with a diminutive example. Instead of “Aujourd’hui, maman est morte”, Albert Camus could have written “Maman est morte aujourd’hui.” We read in Italian and German translations “Oggi la mamma è morta,” “Heute ist Mama gestorben.” But we read in Spanish “Mamá ha muerto hoy,” and no English

² JEAN-PAUL VINAY and JEAN-LOUIS DARBELNET, *Comparative Stylistics of French and English [Stylistique comparée du français et de l’anglais]*, Paris, Didier, 1958], trans. Juan C. Sager and M.-J. Hamel, Amsterdam, John Benjamins, 1995, p. 4.

³ BERND SPILLNER, “Stilistik,” in *Kontaktlinguistik. Ein internationales Handbuch zeitgenössischer Forschung*, ed. Hans Goebel et alii, Berlin, Mouton de Gruyter, 1996, I, p. 146.

⁴ BERND SPILLNER, “Verfahren stilistischer Textanalyse,” in *Rhetorik und Stilistik. Ein internationales Handbuch historischer und systematischer Forschung*, ed. Ulla Fix et alii, Berlin, Mouton de Gruyter, 2008, II, p. 1744.

translation has ever kept the original word order: “Mother died today” (*The Outsider*, trans. Stuart Gilbert, 1946; *The Stranger*, trans. Joseph Laredo and Kate Griffith, 1982), and “Maman died today” (Matthew Ward, *The Stranger*, 1988), not because “Today Mother/Maman died” would be less grammatical, but because the rendering would be less “fluid”, “smooth”, or “natural.”⁵ If the same could be said about “Maman est morte aujourd’hui,” it is not because of linguistic differences between French and English, it is because of stylistic differences between writing practices that have become usual over time in French (and possibly Italian or German) or English (and possibly Spanish) literary prose.

As it appears from this very simple example, one of the first lessons taught by comparative literary stylistics is that we should abstain from interpreting every minute stylistic detail, such as the word order and rhythmicality we found in the first sentence of *L’Étranger*, as if authors only had to select a phrasing out of a couple of options equally available in their languages, and were not also conditioned by the literary prose standards they have become familiar with. French speakers would all spontaneously say “Maman est morte aujourd’hui,” but Camus wrote “Aujourd’hui, Maman est morte,” because it “sounded better” as a novel opening. We should therefore be extremely cautious when we resort to arguments pertaining to comparative stylistics (that is, to contrastive linguistics), when we deal with literary texts, and all the more so if the perspective is not translation-centred.

Let us take now a much broader and slightly more technical example: the presence, scarcity or absence of deictic temporal markers in free indirect speech. According to Gollut and Zufferey: “nos sondages dans la littérature française ne révèlent pas d’attestations sûres de déictiques en discours indirect libre avant le milieu du 19^e siècle. / Le constat peut s’avérer un peu différent pour la littérature d’autres langues. Il n’est que de lire les romans de Jane Austen [...] pour voir que les déictiques sont déjà là très fréquents dans les séquences de discours indirect [72] libre.”⁶ As early as in 1971, Steinberg pinpointed the fact that deictic temporal markers had remained more common in German than in English free indirect speech, and more common in English than in French free indirect speech.⁷ The reason for this, Roncador later explained, was in the languages themselves: the French lexicon has a larger array of anaphoric temporal adverbials than English or German, which, for instance, have no real counterparts to *la veille* or *le lendemain*.⁸ But this does not account for the fact that deictic temporal locators became much more common in French free indirect speech

⁵ See RYAN BLOOM, “Lost in Translation. What the First Line of *The Stranger* Should Be,” *The New Yorker*, 11 May 2012, now online.

⁶ JEAN-DANIEL GOLLUT AND JOËL ZUFFEREY, *La Parole stylisée. Étude énonciative du discours indirect libre*, to be published.

⁷ GÜNTER STEINBERG, *Erlebte Rede. Ihre Eigenart und ihre Formen in neuerer deutscher, französischer und englischer Erzählliteratur*, Göttingen, Alfred Kümmerle, 1, p. 240.

⁸ MANFRED VON RONCADOR, *Zwischen direkter und indirekter Rede. Nichtwörtliche direkte Rede, erlebte Rede, logophorische Konstruktionen und Verwandtes*, Tübingen, Niemeyer, 1988, pp. 228-229.

over time, nor for the fact that they have remained more common in German free indirect speech than in English. Such questions should not be addressed within the framework of (non-literary) comparative stylistics; they can only be answered as issues relating to the history of prose writing techniques and standards and to the history of the European novel, with its different national timelines.

In the conclusion of the very first book ever devoted to free indirect speech, Marguerite Lips noted that this form could be found in many European languages: “Alors seulement un travail comparatif, à la fois historique et statique, résoudrait la question actuellement pendante : [le style indirect libre] est-il né dans un idiome privilégié, dont bénéficient les autres par voie d’emprunt ? Comment cette propagation se fait-elle d’une langue à l’autre ?”⁹ By “à la fois historique et statique,” Lips meant that the evolution of free indirect speech in European literatures could be studied from a twofold perspective. The first one pertains to what we call *comparative literary stylistics* and could explain the spread of free indirect speech by taking note of a common, if not completely parallel, change in literary sensibilities, since in all European countries the rise of free indirect speech coincided with the rise of impersonal narration in the novel. This perspective should have been given full priority: “Le style indirect libre est partout un procédé de la langue littéraire. La propagation de faits de cette nature n’a rien de commun avec la filiation historique des idiomes. La langue écrite obéit à des tendances qui ne sont pas nécessairement celles de la langue en général.”¹⁰

But surprisingly (and perhaps reluctantly), Lips eventually gave priority to a perspective pertaining to (non-literary) comparative stylistics and considered that it was no wonder if the same grammatical features were to be found more and more in all European languages, according to a well-documented process of evolutionary unification: she quoted Antoine Meillet at length (*Les Langues dans l’Europe nouvelle*, 1916) and, following in the footsteps of Charles Bally (the very founder of comparative stylistics and her doctoral advisor at the University of Geneva), she declared: “il se fait de langue à langue un travail d’unification plus [73] profond qu’on ne le croit généralement. [...] C’est sous cet angle que le style indirect libre, négligeable pour qui n’envisage que sa forme extérieure, prend toute son importance, et apparaît avec le caractère propre à un procédé ‘européen’, issu des tendances profondes qui rapprochent les langues et les sociétés modernes.”¹¹

Common sense would recommend a happy medium: both perspectives are relevant; both are needed. But it is not as simple as that, as we will see from a very last example, which will be even broader than the previous one, but less technical. If the rise of free indirect speech was more or less simultaneous in all European literary traditions (with a peak reached between 1870 and 1920), the rise of present tense narrative was not

⁹ MARGUERITE LIPS, *Le Style indirect libre*, Paris, Payot, p. 216.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 216-217.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 218-219.

synchronic at all. In English literature, “historic present” was sometimes used in the nineteenth century by writers like Charles Dickens or Charlotte Brontë, but it was not until the 1960s or 1970s that major novels entirely written at the present tense were published. Around 2000, that form of narration still remained “rare and felt experimental.”¹² In 2015, Richard Lea entertained the hypothesis that its very recent and sudden upsurge could “perhaps be traced back to Hilary Mantel’s *Wolf Hall*, which won the Booker prize in 2009”¹³.

In 2009 indeed, present-tense narratives were still regarded by many publishers as somewhat unnatural or even unpleasant, which Mantel herself confirmed in an interview published by *The Paris Review* in that same year 2015: “the novel was written in the present tense. Someone in the publishing house didn’t want that, so changed it, and I changed it back, and so on, through proofs.”¹⁴ But the rise of the present tense in fiction was then already unstoppable, since quite a few novels longlisted for the 2010 Booker Prize were written in that tense, which sparked a very scathing reaction by authors Philip Pullman (“It’s a silly affectation, in my view, and it does nothing but annoy”) and Philip Hensher (“What was once a rare, interesting effect is starting to become utterly conventional. Some of the novels on the Booker longlist just seemed to me to be following fashion blindly”).¹⁵

No more a new thing today, present-tense narratives still remain a rare thing in English literature compared to their long-established prevalence in French fiction. If *Wolf Hall* was not the first present-tense novel to be awarded the Booker Prize (think of J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace* in 1999), the first prix Goncourt was awarded in 1903 to a novel entirely written in the present tense: *Force ennemie* by John-Antoine Nau. Just like in England, the present tense had until then been occasionally used by novelists to highlight a paragraph or a chapter, but it started its career as a book-length tense around 1900 (that is, long before it became the [74] emblem of Nouveau Roman writers). Never was it considered as a simple trick, and if the form is now becoming cliché, it is because it feels “too fictional” (our age prefers novels deep set in reality, and more and more novelists are now writing *passé composé* narratives), but also because it has been common for decades, and its expressive potential has consequently weakened over time¹⁶.

¹² JOHN MULLAN, “A History of the Present,” *The Guardian*, 25 September 2010, now online.

¹³ RICHARD LEA, “Make it Now. The Rise of the Present Tense in Fiction,” *The Guardian*, 21 November 2015, now online.

¹⁴ MONA SIMPSON, “Hilary Mantel. Art of Fiction No. 226,” *The Paris Review*, 212, Spring 2015, now online.

¹⁵ LAURA ROBERTS, “Philip Pullman and Philip Hensher Criticise Booker Prize for Including Present Tense Novels,” *The Telegraph*, 11 September 2010. See also RICHARD LEA, “Very Now. Has Present-Tense Narration Really Taken over Fiction?” *The Guardian*, 14 September 2010, and “Philip Pullman Calls Time on the Present Tense,” *The Guardian*, 18 September 2010; both articles are now online.

¹⁶ For an overview of the history of present-tense narrative in French and some critical references, please see GILLES PHILIPPE, “Sur l’émergence du présent romanesque,” *Poétique*, 186, 2019, pp. 313-329.

Now, is this a question for (non-literary) comparative stylistics? The English tense system is different from the French one indeed, and for a long time the present tense was considered as ill-fit for narration in English, because of its temporal or aspectual specificities. In 1931, Hilaire Belloc described it as “alien to the nature of English,” Vinay and Darbelnet recalled, before stating what was obvious in the 1950s : “though [it] occurs in English, it is much less frequent in English than in French.”¹⁷ As a result, French present-tense narratives were to be translated with the English preterit. Since the end of the nineteenth century, children books have very often been written with the present tense in France or Germany, but even today British or American publishers or translators usually opt for the past tense, as if present-tense narratives were too bewildering (too literary, *avant-garde* or highbrow) for a young readership.¹⁸ Conversely, the new translation of Enid Blyton’s *Famous Five* series that was published in France in the 2000s uses the present tense, and more recently many people were surprised (some pleasantly, some not) to discover that, in her new translation of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Gallimard, 2018), Josée Kamoun had chosen the present tense, while the previous translation (by Amélie Audiberti, Gallimard, 1955) had translated George Orwell’s preterit by the *passé simple*. But not only did the present tense better meet the requirements of Orwell’s 1946 stylistic manifesto “Politics and the English Language,”¹⁹ one can also rightfully bet that, had he been a French writer when he published his novel in 1949, Orwell might have chosen the present tense: in 1949, Jean-Paul Sartre for one dropped the past tense he had used in his previous novels and chose the present tense for the second part of *La Mort dans l’âme* and the only chapters he ever published of his last and never completed novel *La Dernière Chance*. Orwell indeed did not write in English as much as he wrote at a certain point of the development of English literary prose.

The choice of a narrative tense has undoubtedly to do with the linguistic system of a given language. If the English present tense proved eventually to have the same narrative capacity as its French counterpart, the latter first competed with the *passé simple*, a past tense that was no more used in oral conversation and has eventually disappeared in journalistic writings, while the English preterit is still alive and well. Translating the English preterit with the French present tense appears then to be a legitimate and often a sensible choice. But in everyday conversation [75] and writing, French-speakers most usually resort to the *passé composé* as their spontaneous narrative tense rather than to the present, which has become in that respect a “literary” tense. In Italian, as in the other romance languages, the simple past has remained much more commonly used, and present-tense novels have remained marginal (if no longer

¹⁷ JEAN-PAUL VINAY and JEAN-LOUIS DARBELNET, *Comparative Stylistics of French and English*, cit., p. 134.

¹⁸ See GILLIAN LATHEY, “Time, Narrative Intimacy and the Child. Implications of the Transition from the Present to the Past Tense in the Translation into English of Children’s Texts,” *Meta*, LVIII, 1/2, 2003, p. 233.

¹⁹ GEORGE ORWELL, “Politics and the English Language,” *Horizon*, XIII, 76, 1946, pp. 252-265.

rare), while the compound past still feels “awkward” in a novel, while it is currently thriving in French fiction, as mentioned before.

Stylistic timelines do not indeed parallel linguistic timelines. Hence, the choice of a narrative tense is not to be regarded as a grammatical choice as much as a literary one: writers do not simply choose from the range of narrative tenses available in their languages (between preterit and present in English; between simple past, compound past and present in the Romance languages and in German), they choose from a range of narrative tenses available in their literatures at a given moment. The English or French tense systems have not changed since the end of the nineteenth century but the stylistic rendering of each tense has been continually changing: it was not the same thing to write a present-tense narrative in French in 1900 and in 1960; it was pretty much the same thing to write a present tense narrative in English in 1900 and in 1960. Likewise, it was not the same thing to use free indirect style in 1850 and in 1950, whether in France or in Britain, even if free indirect style, as a grammatical form, can be described in the exact same words for both periods, etc. These are linguistic questions, but they cannot be properly addressed and correctly answered by linguistics as such.

Comparing stylistic choices within the sole framework of (non-literary) comparative stylistics (that is, within the sole framework of contrastive linguistics) gives a distorted view of what is here at stake. If this remains a common mistake, it is mostly because we still live on two illusions. We have already encountered the first one: it is the very idea that different languages carry different “viewpoints of life,” as if writing in French implied more or less the same viewpoint in today’s Africa and today’s France (let alone Renaissance France, etc.). And we know that comparative literature is based on the idea that its methodology and scope are radically different from national literature studies, because it brings together works produced in different languages, not works produced in one language but at different times.

Such a conception of languages and of comparative literature is fortunately losing ground, and so is hopefully the second illusion we have been trying to dismiss so far: it is the two-term model according to which style can only be described as the way a given writer or a given text draws on a given language, overlooking the historical and collective dimensions of literary writing or ignoring them purposefully: “Percevoir dans un texte littéraire ce qu’il y a de propre à chaque auteur, décrire et interpréter les signes du style, telle est selon nous la tâche d’une science tournée exclusivement vers le style.”²⁰ These lines are excerpted from the introduction of the only monograph fully devoted to literary style ever published [76] in the Didier’s Comparative Stylistics series (“Bibliothèque de stylistique comparée”), the first books of which were Vinay and Darbelnet’s *Stylistique comparée du français et de l’anglais*, and Alfred Malblanc’s *Stylistique comparée du français et de l’allemand*, both based on the idea that one language equals one viewpoint of life, reality, science, art, etc.

²⁰ BERNARD DUPRIEZ, *L’Étude des styles ou la Commutation en littérature*, Paris, Didier, 1969, p. 5

T. S. Eliot, and the quest for an English prose with no French accent

Let us keep all this in mind, and allow me to start afresh, with a few lines by T. S. Eliot, which I have already briefly commented upon in a previous study²¹ :

Repetitious and monotonous it [Richard of Saint Victor's prose] may seem. But on examination you find that every phrase makes what went before it a little more intelligible; there is not a word wasted. Furthermore, Richard is very sparing of tropes and figures [...]. It is a prose which seems to me to satisfy the primary demands of writing, that is, to write what you think in the words in which you think it, adding no embellishment.²²

These lines are borrowed from the third Clark Lecture given by T. S. Eliot in 1926 at Trinity College, in Cambridge. Although the Clark lectures were only published posthumously, this one was almost immediately translated into French, and we may want to have a look at the version Jean Menasce gave of the same passage:

Style monotone et diffus, semble-t-il ; on voit bientôt cependant que chaque phrase explicite quelque peu celle qui la précède, et qu'il n'y a pas un mot de trop. En outre, Richard est très avare de tropes et de métaphores [...]. Sa prose me paraît répondre aux canons essentiels du style : il écrit ce qu'il pense dans les termes mêmes qui servent à le penser, sans enjolivement.²³

There are quite a few differences between the English original and the French translation, some of which can naturally be explained by differences between the grammar and the lexicon of the two languages (*on* is the best equivalent of the generic *you*, etc.). But the most striking differences have nothing to do with the language systems. The translator obviously found the original prose somewhat “underwritten,” and tried to improve Eliot’s style, so that it meets the stylistic requirements of the French readership. For example, the first sentence is longer in the translation, and the parenthetical does not appear tritely before the subject any more, but between the verb and the object clause. More importantly, it was impossible to keep the numerous word-repetitions that, from a French viewpoint, disfigured Eliot’s prose. Here the second “word” becomes “term,” the second “writing” becomes “style,” the second “seems” becomes “appears,” and [77] so on. Obviously, Eliot’s prose style was too “repetitious and monotonous” for French readers, so it had to be “embellished,” even if the translation ended up contradicting the precise point that the author was trying to make.

²¹ See GILLES PHILIPPE, “Mind the Gap. Stylistics, Linguistics and Literary History,” in *Writing Literary History (1900-1950)*, ed. Bram Lambrecht and Matthias Somers, Leuven, Peeters, 2018, pp. 9-10.

²² T. S. ELIOT, Clark Lecture III, in *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, ed. Ronald Schuchard, London, Faber and Faber, 1993, p. 103.

²³ T. S. ELIOT, “Deux attitudes mystiques” (*Le Roseau d’or*, 14, 1927), transl. Jean Menasce, *ibid.*, p. 312.

For Eliot was repetitious and monotonous indeed, but on purpose, and all the more so as he knew perfectly well—as all did—that the French stylistic dogma stipulated that prose should avoid repetition and monotony at all costs.

But there may be more: unsurprisingly, the French translation is slightly more technical than the English original text. “Intelligible” could have been kept in French but was replaced by “explicit;” “figures” became “metaphors.” Surprisingly, “phrase” remained unchanged, although the word means “sentence” in French. Why “phrase” then, if this word refers in French to a grammatical unit, whereas in English the term has usually a purely lexical value? Because “*la phrase*” was in France the very first stylistic unit, while the word and not the sentence was the main stylistic unit in the English tradition. For the French, “style” was mostly about sentences; for the English, “style” was mostly about words, hence the “tropes and figures.” Eliot was very English in that respect: whenever he dealt with style, he always commented upon words, not upon word order, for example.

As it now appears, the differences between the English and the French versions of the same passage cannot be reduced to differences in the languages themselves. But the whole thing is even trickier in this very case, as the prose style that Eliot is here describing and promoting is precisely the opposite of what his generation considered to be “French style.” In the early 1920s indeed, the idea was still commonly shared in England that, for the French, stylistic elegance only mattered and even that style was, in many ways, a French notion. Mind you, the word “style” itself appears twice in the translation, in spite of the sacred rule of non-repetition, and, above all, despite the fact that it never appears in Eliot’s English text.

This may seem quite strange at first look, since, be they French or British, witnesses unanimously testified that T. S. Eliot’s French was excellent. Brigid Donovan, who was the writer’s secretary in the mid-Thirties, even recalled that Eliot’s English accent had a specific inflection or melody that she considered as a possible result of his having spoken French frequently.²⁴ Furthermore, Eliot had a lifelong interest in French literature and language. When staying in Paris as a young man, he had even wished to become a “French poet,” although he did not stick long to this project, having perhaps come to share the commonplace idea that writing poetry in French was only adding “an unaccommodating syntax to an unaccommodating prosody.”²⁵ As far as prose itself is concerned, Eliot was, in a certain way, even more radical, as his life-long quest for a “good English prose style” can be read as a reaction to the obsession with French style that was still *de rigueur* in early twentieth century Britain.

[78] Let us now go one step further. In order to measure and assess the possible “un-Frenchness” of Eliot’s prose and the scarcity of French stylistic references in his writings, we need to bear in mind the importance of the French stylistic model for

²⁴ For all details see CHRISTOPHER RICKS and JIM MCCUE, “TSE’s Proficiency in French,” in *The Poems of T. S. Eliot*, London, Faber and Faber, 2015, I, pp. 459-462.

²⁵ THOMAS STURGE MOORE, “A Poet and His Technique,” *The Criterion*, IV, 3, 1926, p. 433.

English prose writing between 1880 and 1930, a period when “French standards of style [...] were widely and frankly accepted by such as took their art seriously.”²⁶ For fifty years indeed, English writers thought that French authors knew how to write and that they themselves did not.²⁷ But Eliot always pitted the common idea that London had to go to Paris to take lessons in style; rather, he longed for a truly *English* prose style at a time when style was still commonly regarded as a French concern. This may be the reason why, when writing about contemporary writers, “style” was never a word Eliot used frequently, as if he found it somewhat suspicious, decadent or both—in a word, French. He felt obviously better at ease with the word and with stylistic considerations when he had to comment upon early modern authors, as in his series of talks on “Six Types of Tudor Prose,” broadcasted by the BBC in June and July 1929. But even in these talks, Eliot implicitly developed a counter-narrative in which English modern prose had but English roots, thus no French ones.²⁸

But even there, as in *For Lancelot Andrewes: Essays in Style and Order*, published in 1928, Eliot remained purposefully untechnical; his approach to style was evaluative more than descriptive; and he used the word with a very broad and loose meaning, while “style” was (and still is) in French a more technical term, covering mainly the linguistic aspects of prose such as grammatical choices or lexical combinations. From a French point of view, Eliot’s considerations on style were not even really about “style,” as they were never grammar-centred, remained only marginally language-based, and often dealt with composition in a rhetorical perspective. That said, Eliot’s stylistic doctrine was summarized in the lines we read about Richard of Saint Victor: expression must suit the subject matter; order and the avoidance of any ornamentation are the first and sole imperatives: “style is concerned with making [a statement] clearly, simply, and in good taste.”²⁹ And Eliot always expressed a strong refusal of the “style for style’s sake” doctrine, then considered a French dogma: “Style alone cannot preserve;”³⁰ “Those writers remain who were more interested in their subject matter than in their style.”³¹

Interestingly enough, Eliot addressed at length the question of “Style in Contemporary English Prose” but once: in an article published under this title in the December 1922 issue of the *Nouvelle Revue française* and directed toward a French [79] readership.³² But contrary to what was then the usual practice in French literary

²⁶ ERNEST A. BAKER, *The History of the English Novel*, London, H. F. and G. Witherby, 1938, IX, p. 205.

²⁷ For more details on the English obsession with French style, see GILLES PHILIPPE, *French Style. L’accent français de la prose anglaise*, Brussels, Les Impressions nouvelles, 2016.

²⁸ See for example “The Genesis of Philosophic Prose. Bacon and Hooker” (1929), in *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Ronald Schuchard and alii, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014-2019, III, pp. 643-649; and the conclusion of “The Prose of the Preacher. The Sermons of Donne” (1929), *ibid.*, p. 672.

²⁹ T. S. ELIOT, “Mr. Chesterton (and Stevenson)” (1927), *ibid.*, p. 315.

³⁰ T. S. ELIOT, *Charles Whibley. A Memoir* (1931), in *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot*, cit., IV, p. 386.

³¹ T. S. ELIOT, “Views and Reviews” (1934), in *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot*, cit., V, p. 254.

³² T. S. ELIOT, “Lettre d’Angleterre. Le style dans la prose anglaise contemporaine” (1922), in *The*

criticism (think of Proust's famous analysis of Flaubert's style in 1920), his analysis remains again quite vague and untechnical, quoting not even one passage, and going no further than saying that the styles of select contemporaries were simple or overwrought. He never considers aspects of prose writing that would be paramount in French stylistic analysis such as whether and how an author deploys adjectives or figurative language, or whether her or his prose is succinct or prolix, her or his sentences long or short. Instead Eliot devotes most of his article to intuitive comparisons between the respective styles of his contemporaries. When, in July 1923, this article was republished in English in *Vanity Fair*, the word "style" disappeared from its title ("Contemporary English Prose. A Discussion of the Development of English Prose [...]"); it had probably been added to the French version, when Charles Du Bos had translated the paper for the *Nouvelle Revue française*.

If we read them carefully, we see that both versions of the essay betray a concerted effort to minimize and even efface any reference to French stylistic models. The first sentence ("It is often said that there is in English no standard prose style"³³) recalls the question raised in Matthew Arnold's celebrated 1864 lecture "The Literary Influence of the Academies," which pinpointed the French interest in language and style, praised the Académie française, and advocated the establishment of a similar institution in England. But no such considerations or recommendations appear in Eliot's article, which equates French style with other European prose styles: "English prose, in comparison with that of the French, Italian and Spanish languages, developed late."³⁴ It is obvious, though, that Eliot had mostly (and perhaps only) the French case in mind: when, a few months later, he raised again the question of the late development of English prose, he was to claim that "the French in the year 1600 *had already a more mature prose*."³⁵

This tendency to avoid any allusion to the French stylistic model becomes even clearer when, in this same 1922 article, Eliot insists on the fact that no English style ever had a stronger influence than Walter Pater's, but neglects to remind what readers already knew: French prose had allegedly exerted a huge influence on Pater himself, whose 1888 landmark essay on "Style" had introduced Flaubert's stylistic doctrines to England. Furthermore, Eliot sees in Pater a "literary descendant" of Arnold, whose prose—he says—had shaped Pater's; but again he neglects to account for the fact that, to quote Henry James, Arnold's language "exhibits frankly [...] a decided French influence," and that Arnold "had been spoken of more than once as the most Gallicised of English writers."³⁶ One can easily guess what is at stake here: since Eliot always

Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot, cit., II, p. 424-429.

³³ T. S. ELIOT, "Contemporary English Prose. A Discussion of the Development of English Prose from Hobbes and Sir Thomas Browne to Joyce and D. H. Lawrence" (1923), *ibid.*, p. 448.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ T. S. ELIOT, "The Function of Criticism" (1923), *ibid.*, p. 462. Eliot's emphasis.

³⁶ HENRY JAMES, "Essays in Criticism. By Matthew Arnold" (1865), in *Literary Criticism*, I, ed. Leon Edel, New York, The Library of America, 1984, p. 712; and "Matthew Arnold" (1884), *ibid.*, p. 725.

regarded Francis Herbert Bradley's style [80] both as a descendant of Pater's (hence Arnold's) style and as a model not only for his own personal style but for any truly *English* prose style, it was important for him to ignore the putative influence exerted by French writers on Pater's (hence on Bradley's, hence on his own) writing style.

It is telling that Eliot conspicuously avoided the question of French influence on English prose style, even in an essay addressed to the French reading public. When dealing with James Joyce, for instance, he notes that the prose of "*A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is the work of a disciple of Walter Pater as well as of Cardinal Newman."³⁷ But Joyce's early style was predominantly modelled on Flaubert's³⁸. Twenty years on, Eliot was again to deny, implicitly but in defiance of the obvious facts, any relation between Joyce's early prose style and any French writer: "Joyce had a remarkable knowledge of English literature, and an extremely retentive memory. He had studied and assimilated many styles. In the *Portrait* there are traces of the writers who had influenced him: writers as different as Jonathan Swift, Cardinal Newman and Walter Pater."³⁹ Fair enough but quite unfair, as the *Portrait* quotes, for example, one of Flaubert's most famous sentences on the necessary impersonality of the work of art. On merely one occasion in his *Nouvelle Revue française* essay on prose style, Eliot evokes a French name: "The influence of Walter Pater has continued almost wholly, mingled with the influence of Renan, in a beautifully written but somewhat out-of-date volume of essays by a writer of our own generation, Frederick Manning, entitled *Scenes and Portraits*."⁴⁰ Fair enough, but quite unfair again: Manning's preface to his 1909 book is a long praise and defence of Ernest Renan, with no word on Pater. A fairer phrasing would read: "The influence of Renan, mingled with the influence of Pater."

In spite of what I said earlier in this paper, Eliot *did* sometimes use the word "style" about modern writers of course; and his 1927 essay on Francis Herbert Bradley starts with an enthusiastic celebration of the philosopher's prose: "Certainly, one of the reasons for the power he still exerts, as well as an indubitable claim to permanence, is his great gift of style."⁴¹ Eliot first rapidly compares Bradley's style with those of John Ruskin or Henri Bergson, before switching to another and much longer comparison that we have already met in the 1922 paper: "The nearest resemblance in style, however, is [...] Matthew Arnold."⁴² Although Eliot's notion of "style" remains as always elusive, the passages he parallels from Bradley and Arnold do share some stylistic similarity, but it is precisely what Arnold was supposed to have borrowed from Renan (abundance of modal or evidential markers, like *may*, *it seems*, etc.; abundance

³⁷ T. S. ELIOT, "Contemporary English Prose," cit., p. 450.

³⁸ See, for example, JOHN PORTER HOUSTON, *Joyce and Prose. An Exploration of the Language of 'Ulysses'*, Lewisburg, Bucknell University Press, 1989, esp. pp. 17-28.

³⁹ T. S. ELIOT, "The Approach to James Joyce" (1943), in *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot*, cit., VI, p. 429.

⁴⁰ T. S. ELIOT, "Contemporary English Prose," cit., p. 450.

⁴¹ T. S. ELIOT, "Francis Herbert Bradley" (1927), in *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot*, cit., III, p. 304.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 305.

of concessive or contrastive [81] conjunctions or adverbs, like *though*, *but*, *however*, etc.; abundance of pragmatic softeners, of hypothetical structures, etc.). In fact, the very first sentence of Bradley's passage reads like an English translation or pastiche of Renan: "It may come from my failure in metaphysics, or from a weakness of the flesh which continues to blind me, but [...]"⁴³

Given the overwhelming number of references to "French style" in England at the beginning of the twentieth century, it is hard to believe that Eliot did not wilfully and purposefully try to contain what he perceived as too strong a French influence on the English stylistic debates and even practices. It had, of course, been usual in England, since at least the mid-nineteenth century, to consider that the question of style was twofold, and that every style had two sides, one personal (singular), one national (standard). But we probably understand better now that Eliot's frequently expressed wish to define a truly *English* prose style had to do with his concerns, on the one hand, with finding a style that would be as English as French style was supposed to be French and, on the other hand, with finding an English style that would be as different from French style as England was different from France. But again, this had nothing or little to do with the languages themselves.

In a 1944 lecture entitled "What is a Classic," T. S. Eliot insisted on the fact that, when assessing the stylistic "maturity" reached by European literatures at a certain time, it was of little use to note that "Every language has its own resources, and its own limitations," and that the question of "the English genius of language," for example, should at least be limited to that of "the genius of the English language of a particular epoch."⁴⁴ But even this was not for him a very satisfying way to put things in perspective, as there is more to stylistic comparison than taking note of the inevitable differences in linguistic systems. Eliot was unknowingly giving us a lesson in comparative literary stylistics.

We can hopefully see better now why comparative stylistics, as a branch of contrastive linguistics, is of so little help when it comes to accounting for the differences we observe in national stylistic standards and practices. Indeed, writers do not "negotiate" directly with their working language, but indirectly through a number of collective prisms (sensibilities, conventions, representations, etc.), which keep evolving over time. We saw for example that, should we want to compare the literary meaning of the use of the present tense in novel written in, let us say, 1990, and in English, French, Italian or German, or should we want to understand what really is at stake in the unlikeness of such small samples as a few lines written by T. S. Eliot in English and their French translation, contrastive linguistics may be misleading.

In the day and age of computational stylistics, we must always remember that there is much more here than meets the eye.

⁴³ FRANCIS H. BRADLEY, *The Principles of Logic* (1883), quoted *ibid.*

⁴⁴ T. S. ELIOT, "What Is a Classic?" in *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot*, cit., vi, p. 670, 675, 678.

ABSTRACT —. Comparative literary stylistics has very little to do with what is usually called ‘comparative stylistics’, which concentrates on the expressive inclinations articulated in this or that idiom, often considered or interpreted in the light of the ‘genius’ of languages when not of the ‘people’. On the basis of selected examples, the present essay contends, first and foremost, that such a perspective distorts entirely the comparison between literary practices which cannot be downscaled to the specificity of the languages they use. By way of illustration, it is worth emphasizing that, if present-tense narrative in the French novel emerged much earlier than in English prose, the reasons of such precedence are definitely not linguistic. The second part of the essay builds on what has been gained in the first one and focuses on a case-study: comparing a few lines written by T. S. Eliot in 1926 and their translation into French one year later, the essay will show that their difference is only marginally related to the disparity of languages and may only be captured through a leap into complexity and an awareness of stylistic practices, values and imagination as they were played out on each side of the Channel in the mid-1920s.

RESUME —. La stylistique littéraire comparée n’a que peu à voir avec ce que l’on appelle usuellement la *stylistique comparée*, laquelle étudie les préférences expressives qui se manifestent dans tel ou tel idiome, ramenant souvent ces préférences au « génie » des langues voire des peuples. À partir de quelques cas concrets, la présente étude entend montrer, dans un premier temps, que cette perspective fausse complètement la comparaison des pratiques littéraires, qui obéissent à des contraintes que l’on ne saurait ramener aux seules spécificités des langues de rédaction. Ce n’est nullement, par exemple, pour des raisons « linguistiques » que le récit au présent s’est imposé bien plus tôt dans le roman de langue française que dans le roman de langue anglaise. La seconde partie de cette étude prend appui sur les acquis de la première pour proposer l’étude d’un cas précis : en comparant quelques lignes rédigées par T.S. Eliot en 1926 et leur traduction française de 1927, on fera valoir que les différences ne s’expliquent que marginalement par la dissimilarité des langues elles-mêmes, mais ne se comprennent que si l’on complexifie le raisonnement, en convoquant l’état des pratiques, des valeurs et des imaginaires stylistiques de part et d’autre de la Manche au milieu des années 1920.

RIASSUNTO —. La stilistica letteraria comparata ha ben poco a che fare con la disciplina nota come stilistica comparata, tesa allo studio delle tendenze espressive che affiorano in ogni idioma, troppo spesso intese come manifestazioni del ‘genio’ linguistico o magari di quello ‘popolare’. Attraverso alcuni esempi scelti, le pagine di questo saggio suggeriscono in primo luogo che un’ipotesi di questo tipo snatura del tutto il paragone tra le pratiche letterarie che rispondono a determinazioni non riducibili alla sola specificità linguistica; per fare un solo esempio, non è per ragioni linguistiche che il tempo presente si è consolidato in Francia nel racconto molto prima di quando sarebbe accaduto nella prosa inglese. I temi affrontati nella prima parte conducono a soffermarsi nella seconda su un caso di studio specifico. Confrontare alcune righe scritte da T. S. Eliot nel 1926 e la loro traduzione in francese (1927) consente di verificare che la differenza tra le due versioni deve ben poco alla disparità linguistica e si comprende solo in un quadro di maggiore complessità che prenda in conto pratiche, valori e immaginario della stilistica nelle sue declinazioni francese e inglese a metà degli anni venti.