Shakespeare said: “Some men are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them.” In like manner, we can say that some people are born into multilingualism, others achieve it by study and hard work, and some have it thrust upon them by history, emigration, and the strange turns of fate.

Romain Gary provides us with an excellent example. He was born a Litvak in a city where Yiddish was the natural idiom for Jews. His mother took him to Russia as a baby. He returned to Vilnius when it was a Polish city; that is where he first went to school and learned to read and write. Gary was born into Yiddish, Russian, and Polish, like millions of others from his region and background. He was born polyglot.

He learned German at school in Poland, and he picked up French at home and through private tutors. As an ordinary, fairly gifted child, and like millions of others of his and other ages, he also achieved multilingualism by a certain amount of not very hard work.

Gary emigrated to England during the Second World War, and there he had another language thrust upon him. As a navigator in RAF 324 Squadron, he just had to learn English to survive. He did so very well, and we must pay credit where credit is due. But in each of the three domains, there was nothing special about Gary’s multilingualism. He was born multilingual, he achieved multilingualism by study, and he had multilingualism thrust upon him by history. The only thing that is slightly special about Gary is that he acquired his multilingual capacities not in just one of the ways that Shakespeare distinguished, but all three.

In the West, multilingualism has been treated throughout the twentieth century as an issue of identity, as a problem, a question, and a curiosity. It is a regular topic for muddled philosophizing of the psychoanalytic kind, and it has also attracted attention from psycholinguists, language acquisition specialists and, most recently, from neuroscientists. In our literatures, too, multilingual writers have been regularly seen as exceptional, strange, and requiring special study: books about Samuel Beckett, Joseph Conrad, Vladimir Nabokov, Eugene Ionesco, Andrei Makine, Isaac Bashevis Singer,
and so on, that either focus exclusively on the role of their bilingual or multilingual capacities in their creative work, or use it as the theme or thread of their critical argument, are beyond counting.

But in Central and Eastern Europe, as in many other parts of the world, multilingualism is an ordinary part of being human. In Calcutta or in Kaunas, in Tel Aviv or in Caracas, many of the most prominent figures in the dominant Western cultures of the twentieth century would not even count as educated persons. The situation in Paris in the lifetime of Romain Gary was particularly striking in this respect. Sartre, Camus, and Malraux could only read texts in their local dialect. Abnormal and bizarre as this is on the world’s stage, it accounts for the obsessive, unhealthy questioning of Romain Gary’s “multiple identity.” Gary himself could not escape the incessant harping on his “real identity” in all the many — perhaps too many — press and radio interviews he gave. Was he Russian? Was he French? Was he Polish? Was he Jewish? He answered as best he could, often using the image of the chameleon. But he was not a chameleon. He was all of those things, and also none of them. That was not an answer that could be understood at the time. Gary allowed himself to be caught up in a series of questions and answers that have no real sense.

The source of the confusion is fairly clear. The nineteenth-century equation of language, ethnicity, and nation lies at the root of Gary’s apparently anomalous position in French and European culture. The nadir of this lethal inheritance of German Romanticism was reached with Ein Volk, Ein Reich, Ein Führer — behind which we should all hear the original equation to which even the liberal Woodrow Wilson, even the high-minded League of Nations subscribed: Eine Sprache, Ein Volk, Ein Reich. But even as this short-lived, tragically misleading moment of European cultural history fades away from daily life, its intellectual inheritance lives on in our minds, and obscures what is truly interesting and valuable in the work of Romain Gary. To be multilingual is not to be cosmopolitan. There is in fact nothing cosmopolitan about being polyglot. For what is a cosmopolitan? An individual, or a plant, or an animal able to take root and to flourish in different environments. The French naturalist Bernardin de Saint-Pierre expressed it thus at the start of the nineteenth century: “De tous les genres d’êtres, le genre des insectes est seul cosmopolite.”¹ This original meaning of the term is still current in botany and the natural sciences. Apart from insects, of course, only humans are truly cosmopolitan, for unlike rhododendrons or polar bears, unlike pandas or even horses, they may settle and flourish in any of the planet’s varied physical and cultural environments. To say that Romain Gary was “cosmopolitan” is only to say that he was a true member of the human race. He settled and flourished in many different places — Russia, Poland, France, England, America,

¹ Saint-Pierre B. Harmonies de la nature (1814), Livre II (Animaux), in Œuvres posthumes, t. II. Paris, Ledentu, 1840, p. 154.
Switzerland, and Spain. But that is also true of many other people whose lives involve wandering, migration, and long vacations. It is neither Gary’s possession of multiple languages nor his eventful and international life that makes him a true cosmopolitan, or makes his cosmopolitanism interesting.

It is in Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s novel of education, Émile, ou de l’Éducation, that we first find negative meanings attaching to the term cosmopolite. Rousseau’s educator advises the young hero of the novel to be on his guard:

Défiez-vous de ces cosmopolites qui vont chercher loin dans leurs livres des devoirs qu’ils dédaignent de remplir autour d’eux. Tel philosophe aime les Tartares, pour être dispensé d’aimer ses voisins.²

This easy equation of intellectualism (“look into their books”) with internationalism (“far and wide”) and unreliability (“duties they do not deign to fill in their homelands”) has had a long and disastrous career throughout Europe in the modern period, but it was not associated with multilingualism until much more recently. Pushkin, for example, was not considered a cosmopolitan just because he was equally at ease in French and in Russian. He gives his hero, Evgeny Onegin, equally, if not so sublimely conversant with the literary cultures of many languages, the option of reappearing after long absence in one of many possible guises:

Чем ныне явится? Мельмотом,

Космополитом, патриотом,

Гарольдом, квакером, ханжой

[. . . ]³

Clearly, for Pushkin as for Tolstoy and a host of others, you could be a man of many languages and also, at will, be a patriot or a bigot to boot: cosmopolitanism is just one among several options, and, by no means, the least desirable. What’s really interesting, however, is that in the Soviet-era school edition that I possess of Evgeny Onegin, there are two footnotes to the passage quoted. Not to “Melmoth” or to “Harold”, literary allusions that might have been useful to explain to Soviet students, but to “Quaker” and to “cosmopolitan.” The latter term is glossed by mid-twentieth-century editors in Moscow as “Человек, считающий своим отечеством весь мир”. Well, that is the dictionary meaning of the word as well as its etymological meaning, a meaning that has been current for at least three hundred years. Why then does it need a footnote when the now-obsolete literary references to Mathurin and Byron do not? Because over the one hundred and fifty years from Rousseau to Soviet Russia, by way of Bonald and de Maistre, Cha-

Daev and Drumont, Maurras and Goebbels, *kosmopolit* had come to mean...Jewish. That is why there is a footnote. What Soviet schoolchildren needed to be told was that Pushkin could have chosen to turn his hero, Evgeny, into anything, a Childe Harold or a puritan, a wanderer or a Slavophile, but on no account could have foisted on him the mask of a “bourgeois” or “decadent” Jew. Little wonder then that Pani Kacew, who was also a captain in the RAF (retired), a Yid and a Mallorcan mogul, a French writer and a Russian bear, chose to call himself a chameleon and not a *kosmopolit*, despite the fact that there was nothing reptilian about him and that his work gives substance and form to the real meaning of *cosmopolitanism* in the modern world.

Gary’s work as a writer in English and in French gives substance to the ideal of a world without borders or barriers in two principal ways. Each of his novels is a dialogue with literary models and forebears that were present in Gary’s multilingual education. They belong neither to French literature nor to English literature understood as language-bounded entities; or, to put it in a now slightly outmoded academic discourse, Gary’s intertexts belong to the transnational heritage of European literature as a whole. Secondly, Gary’s aspiration towards a literature without borders drove him in the end towards a language without boundaries in the special, invented, and deeply expressive dialect of Émile Ajar. The language of Ajar is not just funny, experimental, and quaint, and even less the authentic speech of an appealing Oriental teenager, as Michel Tournier thought (without thinking). It is the embodiment of an ideal of language — a language that belongs to all and to none.

*Le Grand Vestiaire* is set in Paris in the immediate post-war period, but its literary dynamic is a confrontation of Dickens’s *Oliver Twist* with Dostoevsky’s *Underground Man*. *Lady L.* is cast as an entertainment in the style of Graham Greene, but its literary dynamic is to salvage Conrad’s gloom-laden *Under Western Eyes* with a dose of British humour. *Les Racines du ciel* is a recognizable reinvention of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, in which the ultimate secret of the jungle is not the horror of the human heart, but the faint chance of human goodness. *Tulipe* is a book about a Buchenwald survivor who puts Rudyard Kipling into conversation with Dostoevsky’s Prince Mys- hkin by way of imaginary Blacks and Jews in New York. Even his memoir, *Promise at Dawn*, splices Maksim Gorky with Robert Louis Stevenson, and Charles Dickens with Nikolay Gogol. Once you start reading Gary not as a French writer, not as an English writer, but as a world writer with a particular background in the main European literatures of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, things begin to get much more interesting than they might at first seem. Each of his works is made from parts and pieces of earlier works; each is a new performance of established literary material in a new (or apparently new) guise. Gary treats the novel not at all as a medium for self-identification, self-exploration, self-doubt or self-definition, but as an art of improvisation and performance, as if he were a bard of ancient times, returning to his lyre to sing a new song made out of mostly old tunes.
But Gary’s art, like the bard’s, is not a free-for-all. It has rules, and its main rules reveal the sense of Gary’s work. He wrote about Poland when resident in England. He wrote about Vilnius when in a Mexican hotel. He wrote about Paris in Sofia, Bulgaria. He wrote about Los Angeles when in Mallorca, and about the wide African savannah in a cramped apartment in New York. This pragmatic rule of distanced composition is paralleled by the implicit obligation that can be deduced from his work never to splice a French text with a French one, or an English one with an English one. The literary models brought to bear in each individual work are always from two different languages or more, and, in most cases, the source languages do not include the one in which the text is being written. Thus does Gary’s literary achievement have the form and substance of a cosmopolitan ideal, of a literature that moves above and beyond any idea of “national culture” towards something not merely international, but outside the scope of reference of ideas connected with the identities of nations and the boundaries of languages.

All the same, A European Education, The Roots of Heaven, The Ski Bum, and so on are all in a language, and Gary’s strenuous efforts to rewrite them across the language boundary and to move them back and forth between America and France still leave the reader with a book that is either in French or in English. But Gros-Câlin, the first novel that he published under the name of Émile Ajar, is not—or at least, not quite. Of course, it is comprehensible to readers who think their only language is French. But it is a re-enactment of Gogol’s famous short story, Diary of a Madman, containing many words of English (often misspelled), names in Polish (Burak), and Yiddish jokes (le professeur Tsoures). Its narrative conceit — a man who keeps a pet python — is reminiscent of Korney Chukovsky’s Krokodil, and its linguistic oddities include registers of French not often incorporated into literary expression, such as the kyrielle (“sans autre procès de Jeanne d’Arc”⁴), the aural pun (“à des cris défiant toute concurrence”)⁵ and the typographical pun (“dix million d’usagés”⁶). Now it is most usual to praise Gary/Ajar for having expanded the expressive possibilities of writing in French, and it would be unfair to withdraw such an accolade. However, we would rather say that Ajar’s exploit demonstrates that to write in French does not mean that you have to write only in French. To put it another way, the multilingual and multicultural sources of “Ajar’speak” all point towards an intoxicating ideal that is perhaps the ultimate aspiration of the true cosmopolitan: to speak at last in a tongue that is all languages at once.

To ask whether Gary was really Russian, or really Polish, or really French, as many of his even recent biographers do, is to ask a misleading question that shows, among

⁵ Ibid., p. 9.
⁶ Ibid., p. 16.
other things, that the questioner has not read Romain Gary. To answer the question by asserting that at bottom Romain Gary was a Lithuanian Jew makes just as little sense. Gary was a free man and a passionate defender of the human right to be free. As Timothy Snyder says in a recent book about the Habsburgs, “the ability to make and remake identity is close to the heart of any idea of freedom, whether it be freedom from oppression by others, or freedom to become oneself.” Gary became himself as he remade the language of his writing. Ajar writes not French, but “French-plus”. He didn’t write *Finnegan’s Wake*; he didn’t invent заумный язык; he didn’t dabble in concrete poetry nor offer us his *Gesammelte Schweigen* in the manner of Beckett. For those reasons, he wasn’t taken very seriously for quite a while. But in truth, he did a great deal more than Joyce, Khlebnikov, and the rest of the avant-garde. Through his fiction (and not so much through his answers to impertinent and misguided interviewers), he taught us all that you can be at home in language and in literature without having a home to call your own. Gary is not so much a cosmopolitan writer as the writer of cosmopolitanism in its original and most valuable sense.

But there is a catch. Gary was powerless, and perhaps not entirely willingly, to escape it. By stepping beyond the apparently fixed boundaries of literary French, by larding it with Russian sources, Polish proverbs, Yiddish jokes and English malapropisms, Ajar delineates, through literary and linguistic form, the precise identity of his occluded author, Romain Gary. The former French consul general was, in all probability, the only gifted story-teller of his age who could write in French while speaking English, Russian, Polish, and Yiddish at the same time. So the Ajar adventure, the invention of “French plus”, has a suitably ironic end. It demonstrates in an unexpected way just how closely language behaviour is tied to identity in the most limited sense — the actual, civil identity of the real author — even when that identity is, by experience and by conviction, by education and by choice, a truly cosmopolitan one.

David Bellos

Romaino Gary Kosmopolitizmas

Santrauka

Taip susikločius aplinkybėms Romainas Gary tapo poliglotu, bet dėl daugiakalbystės, gana įprastos jo aplinkai ir pasauliui, jis netapo kosmopolitu.


mas vyrsta kitoje šalyje nei yra rašomas kūrinys: Londone jis aprašo Lenkiją (Éducation européenne; Europétiškas auklėjimas), Niujorke prisimena Afriką (Les Racines du ciel; Dangaus šaknys), Sofijoje rašo apie Paryžių (Le Grand Vestiaire; Didžioji rūbinė) ir t. t. Antra, kiekvienas romanas pakartoja mažiausiai dviejų skirtingomis kalbomis, kurios dažnai nesutampa su Gary romano kalba, parašytų kūrinių temas ir motyvus, pavyzdžiui: Didžiojoje rūbinėje kontrastingai lyginamas Oliveris Tvistas su Dostojevskio kūrinių „gelme“, Lady L. susieja Gramą Greene’ą su Konradu (Joseph Conrad), Aušros pažade (La Promesse de l’aube) susipina Gorkis, R. L. Stevensoną, Gogolį ir kt. Ir vis dėlto siekdamas iš anksto numatyto romano internacionalumo Gary visus kūrinius parašė prancūzų arba anglų kalba. Prisidengęs Ajaro (Emile Ajar) slapyvardžiu, jis stengesi išsavduoti net iš šio aprimo.

Ajaro kalba yra sumaniai apgalvotas visų kalbų, kurias mokėjo Gary, mišinys: keturių šiuo slapyvardžiu pasirasytų kūrinių tekstuose galima rasti anglų, jidiš, lenkų ir rusų kalbų ypatybių. Tokiu šaunėsiai netaisyklingu stiliumi tarsi siekiama prancūzų kalbą paversti nauju dialektu, sudarytu iš prancūzų ir kitų kalbų. Ši Ajaro avantūra atskleidžia beribio literatūrinio kosmopolitizmo siekį.


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