

For the Bicultural Happy Few Only: Didier Coste's

Days in Sydney

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In 2005 a small French publisher called *Noesis* brought out a novel with an English title, *Days in Sydney* (2005a).¹ Written by Didier Coste, a French essayist, poet, novelist, translator and academic who taught for some years in Australia,² the novel is a 'bilingual' text set for the most part in Sydney, with French and Australian characters who speak or think either in French or English, and sometimes both languages in the same dialogue.³ To distinguish between the intertwined languages the French passages are printed in a slightly darker ink. Yet *Days in Sydney* is not a 'bilingual' text in the usual sense that it contains no parallel translation. Instead of the accepted convention of the original text printed on the opposite page of its translation, or explanatory footnotes

¹ *Noesis* is a cultural foundation, created by Didier Coste and other writers. *Noesis* (meaning 'cognitive process' in Greek) has so far published some thirty experimental novels. See 'Didier Coste' (Arpel 2007).

² For more details on the author, see 'Didier Coste (CV disponible)' (Coste N.d.) and 'Didier Coste' (Arpel 2007).

³ Throughout this essay the inverted commas around 'bilingual' indicate that the term presents definitional challenges. A standard dictionary definition considers as bilingual any person 'using or able to use two languages especially with equal fluency' ('Bilingual' 2009). Notwithstanding this deceptively simple definition, bilingualism is 'overused in an informal way' (Cantone 2007: 1) as people disregard a bilingual person's proficiency and competency, which may vary from a mere ability to speak two languages to near-native mastery. As Nancy Huston says: 'Il y a bilingues et bilingues. Les vrais et les faux' (1999: 53) (There are two types of bilingual people: real ones and fake ones). Such relativism underwrites the 'Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment' (Council of Europe 2008). Some linguists only apply the term bilingual to 'describe a person who has been exposed to both languages from birth on' (Cantone 2007: xvii), whereas others disregard the origins and causes of bilingualism, and concentrate instead on cognitive processes and issues pertaining to pragmatics and sociolinguistics (Grosjean 1992; Romaine 1995).

containing translations,⁴ the novel switches between languages in a seamless fashion that is the antithesis of bilingual texts. *Days in Sydney*, therefore, is a rare, if not unique, example of a text written in two languages. According to the author such a truly ‘bilingual’ novel might even be the forerunner of a new global poetics.

In his online publication announcement from May 2005, Coste justified this *tour de force* as what he called a ‘nécessité esthétique et une certaine idée de la bi-culture’ (an aesthetic inevitability and an idea of bi-culture) (2005b).⁵ Coste’s sense of ‘aesthetic inevitability’ signifies a compelling urge to give voice to the bicultural universe he created. These intriguing but equivocal concepts are not explicitly addressed in the novel, nor is language use elucidated apart from the occasional passing comments. Exploring Coste’s notion of *nécessité esthétique*, and to a lesser extent *Days in Sydney*’s *bi-culture*, is a way of exploring the space between aesthetic creation and language, literary production and reception. If that space does indeed derive from an aesthetic inevitability the full effect of *receiving* the ‘bilingual’ text also needs unpacking.

After a review and textual analysis of *Days in Sydney* investigating these twined concepts, a second line of enquiry here will situate *Days in Sydney* within Coste’s theoretical speculations on comparative literature and postcolonial studies as set out in his academic article, ‘Is a Non-global Universe Possible? What Universals in the Theory of Comparative Literature (1952-2002) Have to Say About It’ (2004).⁶ With its use of two world languages, its *littérature à contraintes* complexities,⁷ and its elliptical architecture, *Days in Sydney* can be regarded as an experiment in finding another type of space, a space between opposing views on universals in literature beyond pro- or anti-globalisation discourses.

⁴ For instance, Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* contains dialogues in French (2 percent of the text) since the Russian elites of the times had adopted French (or at least their own brand of French) as their preferred language. Tolstoy provided his own translations from French into Russian in footnotes, and all subsequent editions, with the exception of the 1873 edition, have followed the example of the first. (Private email communication of 6 April 2009 with Richard Pevear, translator of *War and Peace* [2007]).

⁵ All translations from French into English are mine.

⁶ Coste expanded on this discussion about the paradox of universals in a global world in his 25,000-word essay, ‘Les universaux face à la mondialisation: une aporie comparatiste?’ (Coste 2006).

⁷ *Littérature à contraintes* is made up of texts written according to mathematical formulae, word games and exercises, typographic or geometrical motifs, or the banning specific letters. Arguably the most extraordinary instance of a whole novel following a constraint is *La Disparition* (1969), in which author Georges Perec never used the letter ‘e’ (the disappearance alluded to in the title). Although the absence of such a letter goes against the grain of the French language, it was not immediately detected. Perec belonged to the OuLiPo (OUvroir de la LIttérature POtentielle), a literary current uniting proponents of *littérature à contraintes*. For a survey of authors and types of literary constraints, see *L’insoutenable légèreté des contraintes* (2002).

The narrative

The novel recounts a week in the life of Jacques Voisin, a French poet and professor teaching at Sydney University. Jacques' daily activities are the backdrop to his wide-ranging reminiscences about the past. Concurrently, with her mind dwelling on her life and separation with Jacques, Jacques' Australian ex-wife, Matilda, is also going about her daily life as an artist and manageress of a garden centre in the Blue Mountains.

During the seven days of the narrative the only remarkable moment is Muriel's sixteenth birthday party. Muriel is Joël's girlfriend, and Joël is the adult son of Jacques and Sylvie. Muriel, one of Matilda's past students, is also the only link between Jacques and Matilda who have not seen, nor heard about, each other in twenty years. Neither Jacques, nor Matilda is aware that Muriel knows both of them. But the birthday party does not bring to fruition the anticipated chance meeting between Jacques and Matilda. Instead, Jacques introduces his new younger girlfriend, Kathy, to Muriel and her friends. She is his honours student who also happens to be Matilda's niece. Towards the end of the novel Kathy realises she is pregnant with Jacques' baby, but before she can tell him about it, and before Matilda finally turns up on his doorstep, Jacques dies in a car crash.

These characters—Jacques, Matilda, Muriel, Joël, Kathy—are all linked by familial, friendly, sexual or working connections. Beneath the fictitious names some characters are real people who may be recognised by whoever was mixing in Sydney's French circles in the 1980s and 1990s. Caught in the multiple, playfully improbable ties and suspense, a large cast of extras experiences its own dramas. In this novel Sydney is a theatrical stage peopled with young and old, French people and Australians, writers and painters, students and teachers, travellers and shopkeepers. With its vast number of characters (on page 82 no less than ten get a mention), its meandering between multiple narrative voices, its to-ing and fro-ing between time periods that renders the weaving of the many narrative threads ever more complex, its complicated family connections, its characters with two or more names (Matilda is M., Carol and Caroline; Robert's 'real' name is Youssef; Jacques Voisin is also James Neighbour), the novel also encompasses many genres: psychological, intellectual and introspective like a university novel, it contains elements of a detective story (mysterious phone calls to Matilda, photos sent to France, 'witnesses'). It is not adverse to parodies either: *Days in Sydney* has a genesis-like seven-day architecture with leitmotifs of rain and heat, interspersed with mentions of Australian pop-culture, such as the early local reality television series from 1992,

Sylvania Waters (99), puns ('Sydney Long: «longing for Sydney»' 79), lists of newspaper items reminiscent of Michel Butor's *Boomerang*, also set in Australia (1978: 159-61). With its scores of university educated, well-read characters, the text is steeped in, even saturated with, artistic and literary allusions. Repetitions, signposts, and prophecies, multiple spatial and temporal strata, hermetic interior monologues, and the straddling of many incompatible genres, constantly draw attention to the writing.

Performing bilingualism

The one feature, however, that is absent from this ambitious work is a conceptualisation of aesthetic inevitability in the performance of bilingualism. Yet it is not hard to understand Coste's technique for switching languages: the omniscient narrator shifts from English to French and vice versa depending on whether the focus is on a French- or an English-speaking protagonist. And unlike novels in the vein of Charlotte Brontë's *The Professor*, where characters spice their utterances with French sentences (1924: 197, 213, 217), or Stendhal's *Vie d'Henry Brûlard* (1982), where the narrator uses the odd English or Italian word, *Days in Sydney* uses French and English in roughly equal measure—approximately 104 pages are in French, 93 pages are in English, and half a dozen pages alternate between the two languages.

Thus Jacques' interior monologues are in French, whilst Matilda's thoughts are in English. Being 'bilingual,' both characters also address other people in the appropriate language. The necessity here is not so much aesthetic as pragmatic, so that language choice rings true because of genuine communicative, narrative or discursive functions. Thus there are moments when Australian songs broadcast on the radio momentarily suspend a flow of French thoughts (Coste 2005: 11), or a phone conversation with an Australian interlocutor interrupts a narrative passage in French (103), only to be resumed one page later (104).

Likewise there are moments of code switching⁸ such as the conversation between Jean-Pierre Duplantier (a Frenchman) and his wife Maureen (an Australian) (32). Code switching occurs in settings of language contacts where differing zones of domestic and affective life are associated with one language rather than the other. At one moment Jacques and his 17 year-old son, Joël, have a conversation in English. Jacques usually

⁸ Code switching refers to instances where a speaker changes or mixes languages between or within sentences (Cantone 2007: xvii).

speaks French with him, but in this instance his apology in English to Joël for forgetting his girlfriend's birthday is meant as a pacifying gesture, an astute observation on the affective significance of language use in families (Yip & Matthews 2007: 14). However a door bell interrupts Jacques and, now angry, he switches to French: 'Tu attends quelqu'un?' [Are you waiting for someone?] 'Non personne [No, nobody] [Joël replies]. It must be for you' (95).

Being at the intersection of a family history characterized by multiple marriages, divorces, de facto relationships, or love triangles, all replete with emotional power games, Joël's use of French or English is not a personal or neutral choice, but the acceptance or resistance to other people's desires:

We [Jill and Joël] would rather speak English together, especially when Papa was not with them. Papa insisted on speaking French with him all the time, although Joël's English was much better and Papa always said, when he read his compositions or his letters: "I'll be known in history as the father of a fine Australian writer!" But Jill reverted to English with him, Jacques had accused her of doing it to distance Joël from both his father and Sylvie, Jill had replied that he [Jacques] spoke French with him [Joël] as if he had a claim on him, which he didn't since he had not brought him up, and he had even spent up to five years without seeing him or writing a single postcard. (66)

As a so-called 'second-generation' French migrant,⁹ Joël is caught in a web of demands and counter-demands that contradict his own life projects. His father is intent on passing his native language on to the next generation, probably with the hope that his son will become 'bilingual.' As a French university lecturer his personal project doubles up as a professional strategy. His son's strategy does not place French at the top of his desired achievements, such as expressing himself, and writing to the best of his abilities. All passages dealing with his life are therefore in English, bar one. Significantly this happens at a moment of despondency when he laments the fact that, with regards to love affairs, he is turning out to be a man like his father:

il y avait quelqu'un ou quelque chose qui s'interposait entre elle [Muriel] et son désir, un voile, une décoloration de l'image. [...] Tout se passait comme si Jacques, malgré son inconsistance, avait déjà contenu dans sa personne, dans son histoire ou dans ses écrits, ce que lui, Joël, allait vivre: il se sentait pour la première fois prévisible et prévu. Car, comment empêcher que ce que nous partageons d'humain à chaque génération ne passe pour une imitation, un remake? (127-28)
(there was someone or something like a film, a discoloured image, coming between Muriel and his desire. [...] Despite his inconsistency, it was as if Jacques had already contained in his own body, his story, or his writings, what Joël was going to experience; for the first time [Joël] felt he was predictable and predicted. Indeed how are we to avoid that our share of humanity in each generation doesn't feel like an imitation, a remake?)

⁹ 'Second-generation migrant' is contentious; it applies to children born of migrants, but who have not themselves migrated. For a discussion on the term's inappropriate applications, see Jacomard (2004).

In this instance, as in many others in this text, Coste demonstrates how language learning and language use are part of individuals' transcultural adventures. Besides being a personal challenge, mastering a language unsettles one's identity, and reflects the emotional nature, and struggle, of transculturation (Toups 2008: n.p.). Switching languages may therefore result in losing one's personal identity as one settles into 'l'imitation, le faire-semblant, le théâtre' (imitation, make-belief, theatrics) (Huston 1999: 30).¹⁰ Huston's words clearly mirror Joël's own feelings.

For a novel so remarkable for its use of two languages, and numerous musings on writers and writing, observations on language use *per se* are surprisingly sparse, and all the more significant. Another instance is Matilda confiding to a friend how hard she tried when she first went to Europe to 'speak perfect French and Italian; each word, each intonation was almost a matter of life and death ... at least a matter of honour' (184). Jacques, her French tutor at the time, had awarded her flawless oral examination a high distinction. She now recollects this achievement and the efforts leading to it with some puzzlement, as if unsure why mastering French was so important to her. After all, it did not prevent Jacques from breaking up with her. Her puzzlement is at the lack of correlation between 'scholastic perfection [and] their perfect life together' (184). Mastering someone else's language was her way of showing love, a perfection that was seductive for a time, but that could not sustain the relationship. Choosing one language over another is at once an act of love and a potential betrayal.

If we accept that languages carry with them a worldview that is distinctive, then by using both languages Coste gets closer and is more truthful to his French and Australian characters' inner worlds. Since interior monologues occupy a large part of the text the characters acquire more psychological depth. A paradoxical effect then for a novel that is profoundly influenced by hyperrealism¹¹ and experimental writing is that the use of the two languages adds a touch of realism.

¹⁰ Nancy Huston is an English-speaking Canadian living in France, who chose to write her award-winning novels in French. For Huston's views on exile and languages, see Rice (2008).

¹¹ The publication announcement in *Formules* describes the novel thus: 'Dans la lignée des grands romans de ville, *Days in Sydney* se joue en contrepoint, alliant l'hyperréalisme du détail quotidien aux prestiges de la fresque narrative' (2005b) (In the wake of great urban novels *Days in Sydney* progresses through dichotomies associating the hyperrealism of daily minutiae to the stature of a narrative fresco.)

The aesthetics of bilingualism

For Jacques, however, language use goes beyond pragmatism, identity politics or affectivity to enter the realm of aesthetics as the following comment on his mother tongue intimates:

la langue française qui était censée être la sienne parce qu'il l'avait, comme Sylvie, apportée avec lui dans ses bagages, lui était devenu un capital étranger, avoir mort et ressassé plutôt qu'organe vivant. (187)
(the French language that was supposed to be his since he had, like Sylvie, brought it along with him in his suitcase, had turned into a foreign capital, an asset dead and remembered, rather than a living organ.)

Jacques' inner perception of his mastery of French is one of loss. This also takes the form of frequent allusions to moments of writer's block: 'Il avait même avoué ne plus écrire, avec un désabusement souriant' (149) (with a faint self-deprecating smile he had even confessed to not writing anymore). Is he deluding himself as to the French tongue being his ('*la sienne*')? Does anybody ever 'possess' their native language? Contacts with another language would have possibly affected his spontaneity in his mother tongue, however the feeling that one does not have all their language's resources at their fingertips is a common one, even in a monolingual individual. Bicultural individuals are only more keenly aware of the fragility of the transition from thoughts to articulated words:

pratiquer une langue étrangère, découvrir en écrivant les difficultés qui lui sont propres, en même temps que les possibilités qu'offrent grammaire, syntaxe, prosodie, permet sans doute de prendre ses distances par rapport à la langue natale, de la percevoir dans son étrangeté. (Dollé 2003: 49-50)
(Practicing a foreign language, and discovering as you are writing its intrinsic difficulties, as well as the possibilities offered by its grammar, syntax, rhythm, undoubtedly allows you to step back from your mother tongue, and contemplate it in all its strangeness.)

And yet, as Huston argues, 'Le bilinguisme est une stimulation intellectuelle de tous les instants' (bilingualism is an unceasing intellectual stimulus) (1999: 46). Jacques' perceived acculturation is unlikely to be felt by his (French) interlocutors. The way he expresses himself throughout the text is sufficient proof that his language capital is still very much alive. His is an erudite style, full of imagery, extended metaphors, well-chosen, at times rare words, and extensive musings. This sophisticated language strives for accuracy and beauty. In this it seems truly the result of a '*nécessité esthétique*,' an urge to write in a certain way and not another for aesthetic pleasure.

Coste's aesthetic inevitability seems also to dictate instances of mismatch between some characters' mother tongue and the language of their inner thoughts. The first few pages

are a case in point. The focus is on Jacques who is reminiscing (in French) about Matilda. The narrative then proceeds to Matilda herself, who logically adopts English for her internal monologue, but her thoughts switch to French as she is remembering a dream she had about Jacques (14). Later on in another typical moment of meditative recollection Jacques recalls Matilda's exact words in English after their separation: 'I still think that we'll end up together' (50), words that struck him enough to become a leitmotiv (82). By then they have been separated for about twenty years, have not seen each other for almost that long, and each has had new partners, new friends, and new occupations. Nonetheless, the narrative progresses between both characters on the basis of their enduring psychic connection. For instance, Jacques and Matilda are insomniacs but are unaware that they both lie awake at night at the same time (27). Transitions between the two characters' interior monologues often occur on the basis of a single word. For example Jacques' meditation about 'visages' (faces) subsides into Matilda talking to her partner, Robert, about 'several faces' (17). The main suspense of *Days in Sydney*'s slender plot is whether Jacques and Matilda will ever meet again, whether such cerebral connection will ever translate into any physicality, and whether their bilingual conversations will resume.

Sydney as a bicultural space

Being a central character roughly the age of the author and a university lecturer in Australia like him in the 1980s and 1990s, the temptation to see Jacques as the autobiographical avatar of Didier Coste is strong. When visiting a museum with Kathy, his new young love, Jacques suddenly exclaims, 'Why don't we write on each other' (132), to which she answers, 'We can begin right away if you want' (133). This metacommentary would suggest that the text has the necessary narratological unity between protagonist, author and narrator to brand it autobiographical. But the autobiographical key is both facile and reductive, and the pervasive use of a third person narrator does not fit well with this theory. In fact if there is one character representing the author in some ways, it is probably Peter Brower, a friend of Jacques introduced late in the novel (122), and who despite the English-sounding name 'thinks' in French. Peter is the one to provide clues to the novelistic nature of the text, and the centrality of Sydney as a bicultural space:

L'intérêt que présentait, du point de vue narratif, la vie de Jacques Voisin était tout à fait indépendant de sa thématique assez monotone, pensait Peter Brower. S'il écrivait un jour un roman

qui le prît pour sujet, il faudrait se situer d'entrée de jeu à une ou deux décennies de là, au début du siècle nouveau, après la grande crise des années 90, pour jouir du recul pertinent. (...) [par] référence à la peinture impressionniste, on pourrait procéder par détails très myopes, touche par touche, dans la dissociation très fragmentée et la plus minutieuse quitte à laisser à l'imagination du lecteur l'éventuelle reconstitution d'un ensemble, d'une hypothétique unité. (...) il avait le sentiment que la vie de Jacques s'était à un tel degré imprégnée de la vie de Sydney que la première était devenue étroitement tributaire de la seconde dans sa propre configuration. (181) (Narratively speaking Jacques Voisin's life presented an interest unrelated to its rather monotonous themes, Peter Brower thought. If one day he wrote a novel that would take him as a subject, he would have to set it one or two decades into the future, at the beginning of the new century, after the crisis of the 90s, so as to enjoy it from a relevant distance. [...] Like in an impressionist painting he could provide myopic close-ups, stroke by stroke, a fragmented and most meticulous disassociation, which would leave it to the reader's imagination to rebuild a possible whole, a hypothetical unity. [...] Peter felt as if Jacques' life was impregnated with Sydney's life to the extent that the former had become closely dependent on the latter in its very configuration.)

This is a wink, a *mise en abyme*, mirroring the intertwined themes of *Days in Sydney*. The monotony of Jacques' existence is indeed compensated by its narrative attraction: his literary ruminations on memory, life coincidences, mysterious connections between people and places, the power of works of art (such as the persistent mentions of Sydney Long's painting, *The Music Lesson*, also reproduced on the cover page), his compulsive repetitions, and the feeling of doom Jacques calls 'l'impardonnable' (15, 89) (the unforgivable). Peter Brower also foretells that Jacques' fate is dependent on Sydney's configuration. On his way to meeting Matilda for the first time in twenty years, Jacques has a fatal car crash on the Spit Bridge (214). Comments by other characters retrospectively take on a prophetic dimension on what will happen to Jacques at the end of that fateful week: 'Dans ce pays, on n'avait pas le temps de vieillir' (48) (In this country you didn't have time to get old); 'Les témoins étaient loin de se douter que la vie de Jacques était entrée dans une phase aussi confuse et chaotique' (118) (witnesses were miles away from guessing that Jacques' life had entered such a confused and chaotic phase); and again:

[Babette Northrop] était (...) de ceux à qui il racontait sa vie affective, comme s'il en essayait avec chacun d'eux le récit avec de minimes variantes pour trouver et enregistrer la version définitive, fixée dans une mémoire paradoxalement collective et délicate, pour après sa disparition. (149) ([Babette Northrop] was one of the people in whom he would confide his emotions, as if with each of them he was trying on a narrative speckled with minute variations so as to find out, and record a final version to be fixed after his demise in a memory paradoxically collective as well as delicate.)

The final ash-spreading scene brings together all the disparate characters for a last homage to Jacques Voisin: 'Jill thought that James Neighbour [aka. Jacques Voisin], whose ashes were now at sea, although he had never discovered the meaning of this land, had come closer to it after all. Future generations will tell, if and when they

publish his papers' (220). Such comments allude yet again to the literary nature of this fictional text, and offer some indications as to another side to Didier Coste's *nécessité esthétique*: the writing of Sydney as a literary, rather than a realistic, space peopled with characters steeped in 'European nostalgia' (134).

Understanding why writers use a language other than their mother tongue thus leads to elucidating the manifold mysteries of the literary imagination, one of them being: 'Comment vivre plusieurs vies et rester soi-même?' (Voisine-Jechova 1995: 11) (how to live several lives and remain oneself?). Coste's creation is a way of finding emancipation from his own limited individuality necessarily implicated in choices (of languages, personalities or destinies). The suggestion that Peter Brower is a textual transposition of the author is both fanciful and true in that it gives clues about the bicultural author's dreamed persona: a Frenchman with an English name, mastering both languages in their highest forms (literature), a dream of fusion with what is strange and foreign, with the Other. Although *Days in Sydney* seems to be first and foremost about the bicultural author performing 'bilingualism,' it is in fact about performing Otherness. This proposition will now become more evident as we turn to Didier Coste's academic writings.

Literature as totality

The novel's language and other experimental features put into practice Coste's beliefs on 'literature as a totality' as elaborated in his article, 'Is a Non-global Universe Possible?' (2004). Coste's novel is an exercise in 'experimental self-theorizing' that adds to the 'unabashed heteroglossy of many current multicultural and diasporic fictions,' via 'a voice that resists the insolent authority of uniformly presented statistics' on globalisation and the hegemony of English (2004: 43). Although the main aim of Coste's article is to posit how the disciplinary wars between Comparative literary studies and Postcolonial studies might be and need to be resolved,¹² the author does provide clues as to his own heteroglossic practice. These indications compensate, to a certain extent, for the absence of any aesthetic conceptualisation in the novel itself. Without entering into the article's debate—global versus historicity; inclusion versus

¹² From the French point of view the debate is still raging. In 2007 a manifesto signed by a group of renowned writers proposed replacing the notion of *francophonie* with that of *littérature-monde* and raised issues of postcolonial literature written in French. For a detailed analysis of the manifesto and reactions to it, see Dutton (2008).

exclusion from the canon of texts written in ‘minor’ languages; multiculturalism versus cultural relativism—which would distract from the present discussion on the space *Days in Sydney* occupies, it is relevant to underscore Coste’s attraction to René Wellek’s philosophy: ‘Whatever the difficulties into which a conception of universal literary history may run, it is important to think of literature as a totality and to trace the growth and development of literature without regard to linguistic distinction’ (40). This statement in effect collapses the vexing division between national and world literatures as a valid critical principle of appraisal. As to the language(s) of world literature, Coste makes a passing comment that seems to favour English as a language that invests ‘magic gifts’ to its users (37).¹³ Coste is not saying that only works written in English belong to world literature. In fact, if one adopts the view that literature is a totality, then the distinction between writing in English and/or French is immaterial. The aesthetic inevitability of bilingualism, analysed previously at pragmatic, affective and aesthetic levels in *Days in Sydney*, takes on the mantle of an act of resistance against erroneous views on universals in literature: ‘un universalisme de résistance’ (Coste 2006: 37). The novel is therefore an exercise both in resisting a relativism that takes on various literary critical guises and in uniting universal differences.

One universal that Coste believes in is that, by essence, literature needs to steer clear of insipidity and sameness (38), otherwise texts are no more than formulaic potboilers. This is an appeal for aesthetic criteria to replace any other labelling. And if these criteria sound somewhat elusive, they nonetheless produce a novel like *Days in Sydney*, which far from being an exercise in aesthetic freedom is constrained by strict rules. One rule that may not be easily perceived by the average reader is the novel’s composition along the shape of an ellipse, a ‘facile but humorous metaphor’ (Coste 2004: 48). At the end of his article Coste explains that the best universal texts are indeed conceived as an ellipse. Unlike other geometrical images, ellipses escape binary systems since they progress in a non-oppositional fashion around multiple foci—like French and English; or Jacques, Joël and Matilda in *Days in Sydney*. Coste’s academic article and creative output could even be viewed as calls for the adoption on the global scene of *littérature à*

¹³ In his 2005 online announcement, Coste also foreshadowed an edition of *Days in Sydney* wholly in English, adding that ‘il n’y en aura point, par principe, en français seulement’ (It is a principle that there will be no French-only version). On the other hand Coste self-translated *Vita Australis*, a collection of poetry (1977), which he later published in an augmented French version (1981).

contraintes.¹⁴ Often resulting in arcane and complex texts, *littérature à contraintes* abides by hidden and arbitrary non-literary rules requiring great ingenuity to circumvent and interpret. Yet such constraints afford a creativity that flouts ideological debates, such as the universal versus relativist debate.

What gives the novel its universal architecture, then, is the way the ellipses are firmly anchored in one place, the city of Sydney, a kind of peaceful ‘contact zone’ (Pratt 1991) where two world languages and cultures live side by side, harmoniously and meditatively. The novel is therefore a paradoxical demonstration of how to respect alterity and decentre the world, in short, how to write a truly ‘world’ text that is not quite global either.

This paradox becomes clearer when attempting to identify *Days in Sydney*’s intended readership. If the production process creates an aesthetic space left open to multiple interpretations—‘It was a pet maxim of Jacques that there is no end to interpretation’ (220)—the reception of *Days in Sydney* also presents challenges. For all its vagueness Coste’s ‘certaine idée de la bi-culture’ means his novel is, by necessity, aimed at a ‘petit cercle des bilingues d’Australie’ (a small circle of bilingual Australians) who would have experienced the plethora of feelings and effects shown in the novel during their own interior monologues, dialogues and code-switching situations. Made up of academics, artists, English-speaking French and French-speaking Australians, and the children of a small French diaspora, very much like in *Days in Sydney*, this constrained circle is an ‘imagined community’ not bound by nationalism (Anderson 1984), but by language and culture. Could this circle embrace French-English ‘bilingual’ people outside Australia? Possibly, but even though such readers are able to engage with this ‘bilingual’ text, they might miss its wealth of allusions—not such an unusual situation for texts reaching unintended audiences. For instance, Coste’s ‘certaine idée de la bi-culture’ probably ensures that the leitmotiv of not ‘wanting’ to rain—‘Voulait-il pleuvoir dans ce lieu enchanté?’ (71) (Did it want to rain in this enchanted place?)—or Matilda feeling like a ‘thirsty plant’ (134), will have more resonance for a reader familiar with the trauma of decade-long Australian droughts. Nonetheless, as Mary-Louise Pratt claims, referring to a bilingual text written in another transcultural zone of contact (the Andes under Spanish colonial rule): ‘Such a text is heterogeneous on the

¹⁴ See footnote 6.

reception end as well as the production end: it will read very differently to people in different positions in the contact zone' (1999: 3).

Conclusion

Coste's heteroglossic text cannot portend to be a model for other bi-cultural communities in Australia or elsewhere. Like any experimental novel *Days in Sydney* fashions its implicit readership in its own image, and only because of the world nature of the two languages involved might conceivably be read by other types of readers. By foregrounding linguistic and cultural conditions in his publication announcement (2005b) the author craftily glosses over more complex issues of reception for a text that is many other things than *just* bicultural. Readers not only have to master two languages and cultures but also have to be *au fait* with introspective, experimental novels driven not by plot but by characters' associations of ideas. Coste's *bi-culture* is not a linguistic community as such, but an imagined cultural elite, only a happy few who occupy a small space indeed, since being part of the 'le petit cercle des bilingues d'Australie' might only be one amongst many pre-conditions. The reader will principally have to share an interest in literary texts reading like multi-layered palimpsests that no-one, even 'bilingual' people, can ever fully 'possess.' By creating this original cultural object Coste performs and upholds cultural Otherness as well as aesthetic Otherness.

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