

A paper/fiction against an anthology, by M*I*n K*nder*

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Abstract. Helen Constantine's collection *French Tales* is something of a puzzle, although I personally am grateful for it. I present some reactions I anticipate to the collection, or elaborated versions of these reactions. I do so by means of a pastiche of a widely read European author, varying the opening of his *Life is Elsewhere*.

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Exactly what was the conception behind the anthology?

The poet's parents had quarreled severely that day, but they agreed on one thing: this anthology of French tales was not good enough. And the makers knew that. On the front cover was a photograph of a woman with a long plait of hair and her back turned to the viewer, taking her bicycle away past a row of trees. No doubt she was returning to nature and to lyrical poetry, unimpressed by what she had read. The anthology of French tales had some older fictions, from two centuries ago, but where was Maupassant's "The Necklace"? The newer stories were by authors whose names carried no weight with foreign readers and would certainly struggle to make an impression.

When the poet's mother contemplated the question of what the criteria for inclusion were, only one possibility entered her mind: the power of allusion. The first story is not really a tale at all. Cinderella is a tale, Sleeping Beauty is a tale; this is a short realistic story. It did not have any of the things she associated with France. The country was a home of experimental art, but the form was conventional. And there was no romance, no fashion, and no revolutionary activity. Couldn't the author write a story involving a student wrapped up in

the excitement of the 1968 protests? Instead a studious introverted character has a dream which she mistakes for reality and pulls the emergency cord of a train, which everyone knows leads to no good. Then Maman remembered an intricate story from England. Inside it was a story about a train and a predicted disaster. The person who predicts the disaster does not pull the emergency cord. Surely the author was alluding to that and that is why she was included in a book of tales published by Oxford University Press.

When the poet's father contemplated the question, three possibilities occurred to him. The first was that an anthology of French tales translated into English in the twenty-first century does not exist in such isolation. There were anthologies of French stories before and there would be anthologies after. It exists in a world of other anthologies of French stories. One could not include a fiction which was already in another anthology – that would surely be frowned upon, in the anthology-making community. But there were no other anthologies of French tales in the public library. If these included good stories, they did not reach the shelf, like boats sunk without a trace. Perhaps whoever read this material was likely to download Internet anthologies as well, and everyone knew this.

The second possibility was that inclusion in this anthology was like failure at an auction. A number of contemporary stories were being auctioned off, with critics bidding for each one, and any that did not receive bids or did not receive high enough bids would end up in an anthology, instead of a lovely translation in a journal. Hopefully someone somewhere would write a commentary on one of these. But the poet's father doubted that anyone would.

The third possibility was that they were preparing people for the future. In the newspaper, the poet's father had read about how the supplier for a famous chain of fried chicken had been changed, leading to a crisis. Well, the world has to cut down on meat consumption anyway, but a new generation was stubborn and wanted to do things their way,

even if their way satisfied no one. The poet's father started watching the highlights of a football match, but then wondered what had actually happened.

Note. Moving out of pastiche mode, here is the opening of Jacques Derrida's "Signature Event Context," for the purpose of raising a question:

Is it certain that to the word *communication* corresponds a concept that is unique, univocal, rigorously controllable, and transmittable: in a word, communicable? Thus, in accordance with a strange figure of discourse, one must first of all ask oneself whether or not the word or signifier "communication" communicates a determinate content, an identifiable meaning, or a describable value. However, even to articulate and to propose this question I have had to anticipate the meaning of the word communication: I have been constrained to predetermine communication as a vehicle, a means of transport or transitional medium of a *meaning*, and moreover a unified *meaning*. (1977: 172, his italics)

It is flashy and sounds clever (to me). I am wondering: where is that kind of stuff within the anthology, or where is its counterpart in the world of French fiction? It is like someone driving down your road in an annoying car late at night, playing loud unfamiliar music. Where is that stuff? I worry that our local system of classification – this is philosophy and that is fiction (and that over there is music) – prevents some material from reaching me. Anyway, my own impression is that there are quite a few good stories in this collection of French tales, some old and some new, as if from a dozing literary giant, and the anthology is very useful for me.

References

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