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What's language got to do with it?

Among the Australian memoirs of life in France, the encounter with the French language is invariably evoked. Even those who socialise only with other Anglophone expats find themselves in situations where French is the only language option. Whether it's with the butcher, the baker or a potential partner, each of the authors is inevitably confronted with the need to communicate in French. But how important is French language in the 'French life' of these writers? The memoirs recount a transformation of the self, achieved through transplantation into a French milieu, but what role does language play in the renegotiation of identity? What, if anything, has language got to do with it?

This chapter starts with a brief detour into neighbouring genres of memoir that feature the encounter with a foreign language, before comparing these with the ways in which the Australian authors represent French language—hearing it, seeing it, learning it, speaking it. It identifies several patterns in their depiction of French and of the impact of language difference on their identity and feelings of belonging, patterns that resonate with wider Australian conceptions of language learning. It then moves on to examine more closely a memoir that defies these patterns—Ellie Nielsen's *Buying a Piece of Paris*—which plays a double game in its representation of the transformative power of speaking a second language.

Language memoirs

In a reflective essay following the publication of her memoir *French Lessons* (1993), US academic and author Alice Kaplan coined the term 'language memoirs' to refer to 'autobiographical writing which is in essence about language learning' (1994, 59). In the years since, two kinds of memoirs about learning and moving between languages have received increasing scholarly attention. On the one hand are studies of published language memoirs, life writing by bilingual writers. The writers studied are often migrants to Anglophone countries, such as Eva Hoffman (whose *Lost in Translation* is seen to epitomise the genre), Vladimir Nabokov and Richard Rodriguez, or Anglophones abroad such as Nancy Huston and David Mura.¹ On the other hand are studies of the written and oral testimony of second language learners, both enrolled students and those migrants, travellers and enthusiasts who have learnt a language in informal settings.² This flourishing of research reflects both twenty-first-century interest in cross-cultural life writing (cf. Dalziell 2002; Perkins 2012; Besemeres and Wierzbicka 2007) and also a more sociocultural orientation in the field of second language acquisition, leading to acceptance of methods of narrative enquiry and to curiosity regarding the more subjective aspects of language learning (Swain and Deters 2007). A common thread throughout these studies is the renegotiation of identity and belonging undertaken in a second language, understood as a self-translation and even a reconstruction of self through language. Language learners of all kinds are seen to explore the possibilities of self and of hybrid identities and to perform subjectivity in new ways through experimentation with another language.

It is curious to see how little overlap there is between these memoirs and another subset of life writing across cultures: travel memoirs, and in particular travel memoirs by Anglophones. In contrast with the emphasis on the transformative powers of language, Michael Cronin, referring both to travel writing and to critical studies, has remarked on the '[i]ndifference

1 Published language memoirs are analysed by Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000), Pavlenko (2001a, 2001b), Kinginger (2004b), Besemeres (2002, 2004), Cristina Ros i Solé (2004), Kramersch (2005) and Karpinski (2012).

2 Analyses of reflections by language learners on their learning journey include Norton (1995, 2000), Kinginger (2004a), Vitanova (2005), Kramersch (2009), Coffey (2010) and Coffey and Street (2008).

to the question of language in many of the key texts on writing and travel that have been published over the last two decades' (2000, 2) and Mary Besemeres has noted that:

[o]nly a fraction of travel books in English [...] emphasise the language borders that are crossed in much international travel, and deal in a sustained way with the question of how language impinges on the self. (2008, 245)

Although Alison Phipps optimistically opens her essay 'Tourism and Languaging' with the statement that 'Tourism offers a profound and concentrated encounter with other languages' (2009, 58), she concedes that tourist language learners 'who bother with often profound and relational learning', who step out of their comfort zone and risk their sense of self through their interactions in a foreign language, are a minority (2006, 184).

The memoirs by Australians of their time in France do not fit neatly into any the genres described above: reflections on language learning are rare; they are not stories of migration (the vast majority of the authors return to live in Australia or live only part-time in France), nor are they clearly travel memoirs. As discussed in Chapter 2, travel and sightseeing are erased in the narratives, which focus on the experience of daily life in France, however short the sojourn may be. What then can we learn from them about the inevitable confrontation with French language that occurs when Australians choose to live in France?

Representations of the encounter with language difference

There is wide variety in the level of French language proficiency of the Australian authors of life-in-France memoirs, ranging from minimal vocabulary (*bonjour, merci, champagne*) to the capacity to participate in radio interviews on literary topics. But while these authors do not show the 'indifference' to language reported by Cronin—they all emphasise the encounter with French and most make some effort to learn the language—it is rare in these books for language to play a major role in the transformation of the self that occurs during the expatriate experience.

This contrasts markedly with the accounts by prominent migrants to France collected by Jacqueline Rémy in *Comment je suis devenu français* [How I became French] (2007), so many of whom explain their identity and feelings of belonging in terms of their relationship to the French language. Rémy's 20 interviewees migrated to France from 16 different countries and included only one Anglophone. Of these 20, it is not only the writers and philosophers, like Robert Maggiori, who claim that being French is a question of mastering the French language (121), but cartoonist Enki Bilal, born in Yugoslavia (34), businesswoman Mercedes Erra from Catalonia (77), and paediatrician Aldo Naouri born in Libya (182) among others.

Clearly the Australian memoir writers see things differently, for they tend not to view French language proficiency as integral to having a French life or feeling a sense of belonging in France. How then is the experience of language difference represented in these books? Four patterns emerge: French language as ornamental, diminishing, automatic and (occasionally) transformative.

French as decorative

In some of the memoirs, French language is above all decorative, serving to embellish an elegant backdrop of cafés, boutiques and markets (cf. Jaworksi, Thurlow, Lawson and Ylänne-McEwen 2003) and to accessorise one's life. Such 'lexical exoticism' (Cronin 2000, 41) is a use of French familiar from the marketing of fashion, food, luxury goods and homewares, enabling Janelle McCulloch to identify 'the cosmetics and fashion departments of David Jones' as the major contributor to her language learning (2008, 132). Margaret Ambrose structures her book as a language learning memoir, but the function of French throughout the memoir is simply to add to the 'glamour' Ambrose is trying to achieve for herself. French language, as 'the most obvious icon of Frenchness', bestows aesthetic value and prestige on the speaker (Coffey 2010, 122). Most prominent among those whose stay in France is measured in weeks rather than months or years, this representation of French is often accompanied by expressions of frustration, but little negotiation of identity. Sally Hammond, in *Just Enough French*, constantly laments and satirises her lack of French language skills and vows that next time 'we would come equipped with not just enough French, but a whole *vocabulaire!*' (2002, 259), a vow that is not fulfilled in the sequel, *Pardon My French*. The titles of her two memoirs suggest an expectation that the reader will be understanding.

Similarly Susan Cutsforth repeatedly bemoans her 'very limited French' (2013, 77) and despite good intentions finds little time for improving it:

Françoise had very kindly offered to give me French lessons every day and yet I could never seem to find the time. Maybe next year. What a constant refrain that seemed to be. (2013, 221)

Her wistful attitude to language learning contrasts with her superhuman efforts to clear the garden and renovate the house. The acknowledgement of her lack of proficiency in French, however, does not deter her from inserting French words into her narrative at every opportunity, with no understanding of the most basic elements of word order, gender or even the difference between nouns and verbs, resulting in entry-level *franglais*: 'the adorable *la chien*' (Cutsforth 2014, 85); '*très merci beaucoup*' (95), 'my *petite* French' (97); 'it is far too *très cher*' (176); 'our project is not *fin*' (232).

Although Cutsforth's and Hammond's books provide the most glaring examples, French language errors are not uncommon across the corpus, especially among the locally published books. It is revealing to compare the infinite care and obvious effort devoted to home decoration (Cutsforth) or layout and images (Carla Coulson's *Paris Tango*) with the lack of importance given to correcting the French, suggesting that French language is prized above all for its decorative value rather than as a vehicle for communication.

French as diminishing

Among those who stay longer and/or have greater opportunities for interaction with Francophones, efforts to master or at least communicate effectively in a new language have a much greater impact on identity. This impact is, however, often represented in negative terms: the foreign language is an obstacle to be overcome, and its effect is a limiting one, diminishing the author to a shy shadow of the familiar self. Australian journalists are devastated to find themselves mute through their lack of language proficiency: Sheryle Bagwell undergoes a personality change from 'outsspoken and argumentative' to 'meeker, more timid' (2006, 17); Nadine Williams is 'silenced, metamorphosed into a reluctant listener' (2007, 106); Sarah Turnbull finds herself described as 'shy' (2002, 50) and feels 'as though in trying to express myself in another language I'd suddenly plunged fifty IQ points' (47); and for Janelle McCulloch, being

unable to converse is 'like losing a leg for an athlete or a tongue for a tenor. You feel foolish. Ignorant. And worst of all, illiterate' (2008, 133). Meanwhile Bryce Corbett observes that 'Where in my own language, I was the life and soul of the party, in French I had become a conversational wallflower' (2007, 39). Rather than self-translation and the construction of hybrid identities, the most vivid examples from the memoirs of self-transformation wrought by attempting to interact in another language are depictions of a diminution of self. If French language can be seen as an adornment, here it is the speaker who is rendered merely decorative through lack of facility in the language.

Now these memoirs do not end on this dismal note. In most cases, the stay in France results in a new sense of self and an exploration of new forms of subjectivity. However, language is not seen as the overriding means of achieving this. Rather it remains a hurdle and a hindrance. The renewal of self is achieved despite rather than through the confrontation with language difference. Mary Moody, in the course of four volumes of memoirs, arrives at a point where she is 'just not the same woman' as when she first went to France, but remains 'tongue tied' in conversations in French (2009, 63–64). Towards the end of a month in France where she has constantly felt excluded by her language difficulties, Nadine Williams starts to make progress, but this is merely a step towards making up for the deficit she has experienced, and she still feels 'diminished' in French (2007, 240) rather than enjoying an expansion of the possibilities of self. And although both Corbett and Turnbull after years in Paris manage to speak French quite fluently and forge new ways of being that are 'betwixt and between' French and Australian modes (Turnbull 2002, 298), language is not the primary means of transformation in either text.³

French fluency as invisibly acquired

The lack of information in these memoirs about the process of achieving fluency and the doors it opens is interesting in itself, for it fits with another pattern in the representation of language in the memoirs: when it is not an obstacle, language often becomes transparent in the accounts of interaction (cf. Cronin 2000, 39). In these cases, the author's proficiency in French smooths over language difference, concealing it, such that the

3 Cf. Besemeres on Turnbull's engagement with different cultural scripts for communicative behaviour in her 'immersion narrative' (2005).

recounting of an exchange carries little trace of the fact that it occurred in French. For some, this proficiency was acquired before the travel that is recounted. Stephen Downes makes a single mention of grappling with the French language in Paris 35 years prior to writing *Paris on a Plate* (2006, 14). Henrietta Taylor attributes her proficiency in French to working as an *au pair* a couple of decades previously, but the details of the process of learning are glossed over to the extent that fluency appears to be an automatic result: ‘as I negotiated my way through family politics, I learnt to speak French flawlessly’ (2005, 23). Katrina Lawrence refers to lessons but affirms that ‘French is a surprisingly easy language to learn, speak and read once you get on a roll’ (2017, 31). John Baxter arrives in Paris aged 50 with a French vocabulary limited to the titles of classic films (2002, 321), and soon after mentions ‘making and taking phone calls in my gradually improving but still splintered French’ (345). By the second volume of memoirs (*We'll Always Have Paris*), however, he is able to pepper his text with erudite quotations in French, and gives the impression of mastering French expertly. Again, there are no details of the process. In four volumes of memoirs filled with entertaining and perspicacious observations of Baxter’s life in Paris, there is no chronicle of language learning.

While Barbara Biggs, Jane Webster and Shay Stafford are less elliptical about their efforts and progress, nonetheless remarkably few of the memoirs devote more than the scantest attention to the processes by which fluency is attained in a second language and the identity issues that arise on the way. Decorative, an obstacle, a source of frustration or comedy, or an unexplained skill, these are principal ways in which French language and the ability to use it are represented in the vast majority of the memoirs.

The representations of language learning as ornamental, dauntingly difficult and only magically attained by the lucky few both reflect and perpetuate more general views of language learning in Australia, where the relevance of foreign language learning is disputed, where only 10 per cent of students learn a language to the final years of secondary school (ACARA 2018), and where the ‘provision of languages in schools in Australia and uptake by students remain fragile at all phases of schooling’ (ACARA 2011, 5). As Tony Davis remarks wryly in one of the few memoirs in the corpus to probe the learning process, ‘When someone in Australia speaks a second language, it tends to be English’ (2007, 71–72). The prevalence of a ‘monolingual mindset’ (Clyne 2007; Liddicoat and

Crichton 2008) in Australia underpins negative public attitudes towards language learning in some quarters, making it possible to proclaim and attract support for the idea, as popular Melbourne journalist and radio broadcaster Steve Price did, that Australia should 'ditch the study of languages', because they are 'basically useless for future employment' given the status of English as 'the universal language of business, diplomacy and entertainment' (2011). To put it in Gardner and Lambert's terms (1972), instrumental motivation for language learning is low among the demographic Price represents. And where French is concerned, it seems that integrative motivation—based on an affinity and desire to communicate with the speakers of a language—is similarly low, such that neither of the principal categories of motivation for language learning identified by Gardner and Lambert is prominent in Australian culture. For the Australian fascination with France is focused primarily on its style, gastronomy and sights, extending only in attenuated form to its people. As Ros Pesman explains in her history of travel by Australian women, since colonial times, travel to Europe has represented opportunities 'to see the sights, to acquire a little foreign language and culture, to be stamped with the overseas imprimatur' (1996, 207), in short, to gain status. In parallel, French language skills have been prized as a mark of refinement, of social standing, an accoutrement rather than a gateway to intercultural communication.

French as transformative

This background makes all the more refreshing the handful of Australian memoirs in which acquiring proficiency in French is not only visible but highlighted, where language skills are enabling rather than limiting. In four of the memoirs, speaking French is foregrounded as the very means of transformation of the self, re forging the author's experience. Maureen Cashman in *Charlie and Me in Val-Paradis*, Tony Davis in *F. Scott, Ernest and Me*, Elaine Lewis in *Left Bank Waltz: The Australian Bookshop in Paris*, and Ellie Nielsen in *Buying a Piece of Paris: Finding a Key to the City of Love* are all self-deprecating about their language progress; all remain acutely aware of that their French is not native-like, but nonetheless draw attention to the subtleties of language use. French still poses difficulties, but their efforts to overcome these obstacles open horizons and enable these authors to forge a local self. Inhabiting another language becomes a major means of intercultural discovery and it is not by chance that these are among the more perceptive memoirs on questions of cultural difference.

Cashman's understanding of the complexities of consuming an aperitif (2008, 287), for example, stands in refreshing contrast to the widespread assumption that it's very French to drink large quantities of alcohol, while Lewis outlines strategies for negotiating a bureaucratic standoff (2006, 311), and Davis discourses on the range of meanings of 'intéressant' (2007, 15) and the differences between French and Australian means of constructing an argument (106). The insights they gain are not simply a product of extended time in France: although Lewis and Cashman can measure their French sojourns in years, Davis returns to Australia after nine months, and Nielsen's visit is only a matter of weeks. These authors do, however, make considerable efforts to engage in interaction in French with Francophones.

Nielsen's memoir is particularly interesting, because during her short stay in Paris she carries her readers along on a language learning journey under the guise of a rather different enterprise. Paradoxically, the memoir both details the process of language learning and constantly deflects attention away from it to something far more concrete: real estate. The importance of speaking French is ever-present in the text but repeatedly minimised. This is, then, a covert language learning memoir, a memoir that claims to be recounting something else.

Ellie Nielsen: *Buying a Piece of Paris*

In one of the shortest narrative timeframes of these memoirs, Ellie Nielsen gives herself a fortnight in Paris to buy a life there. This is the ambitious premise of *Buying a Piece of Paris*. Nielsen, a regular visitor to France from Melbourne, recounts a two-week stay in the French capital, husband and small son in tow, in which she sets herself the task of buying an apartment and, with it, 'a Parisian life' (2007, 51, 171, cf. 8) and an intimate sense of belonging to the city (82). Throughout the book and true to its title, Ellie, the narrator, is candid about her primary technique for attaining her goal of becoming a Parisian: 'Buying your way in. That's what I'm trying to do' (47). Purchasing a Paris apartment will, she hopes, provide the passport to her integration:

Despite all my efforts, I've never befriended a Parisian by chance alone. All my intimates here are the friends or family of friends of foreigners like myself. I'm hoping that buying an apartment will change that. (82)

When she opens a bank account, she emphasises the way in which her purchases will distinguish her from the tourist and establish her identity as a Parisian:

[A] Paris chequebook is a licence to buy anything. It will give me a million marvellous opportunities to demonstrate publicly that I am part of this city. I haven't just galloped in to gaze up at the Tour Eiffel or queue up for Sainte Chapelle or sigh into the Seine. I'm going to be where the real Parisians are—inside. My chequebook and I are going to be making all those small, crucial, everyday decisions that make up real Parisian life. (171)

Here, purchases are said not only to enable but even to constitute Parisian life, and Nielsen presents her Paris story as a shopping expedition on a grand scale, from the first visit to an estate agent to the day a contract on a Paris apartment is finally signed by both parties. But the book is not the musings of a spoilt princess who blithely believes that everything is for sale. Firstly, the very focus on the nitty-gritty of commercial transactions sets her apart from a number of the memoir authors who never allude to the fact that their financial position and class privilege are not available to all. More importantly, at every step, the ostensible narrative of purchasing a Parisian life is undercut by a far more subtle understanding of belonging and identity, in which language plays a key role. Despite the explicit claims that real estate and money will enable Ellie to achieve her ideal of a Parisian life, the idea of buying belonging is constantly undermined in the memoir. Closer reading shows that the purchasing path to her goal of belonging is a dead-end and that language is in fact the 'key' to the city that she needs to acquire.

The Parisian life Ellie seeks is emblematised by an imagined interaction with a local butcher that bookends the memoir:

And what I wanted, more than anything else in the world, was to walk into that butcher's shop and buy a piece of paradise. I wanted to say, 'Bonjour, monsieur' and have Monsieur say, 'Bonjour, madame.' And I wanted to be able to tell him, calmly and with some authority, that I would like half a rabbit (no, I don't need the head) and a few pieces of canette (female duck's legs) and some andouille. (1, see also 244)

In this passage from the first page of the book, she describes her ideal as a form of daily life in Paris that entails interactions in French about French routines. Although it is presented as a purchase, the 'piece of paradise' she

wants to buy is not so easily commodified, and not necessarily obtained through buying the meat. The ability to converse with the butcher ‘calmly and with some authority’ requires French language proficiency and cultural competence, qualities that cannot simply be bought. Nor do they naturally follow from investing in real estate, however close to the shop it may be situated. Indeed, as she writes in the previous paragraph ‘It was experience that excluded me’ (1), experience, not an address. And yet the memoir leaps from the fantasised exchange with the butcher to the plan to buy an apartment as a means of realising this dream, as if the two were necessarily connected. Although the book follows the story of buying an apartment in order to be a Parisian, the dream of belonging is articulated, from first until last page, in terms of language proficiency: ‘Whilst thanking Monsieur I would purse my lips, shrug a shoulder, and outline my weekend cooking-plans in flawless French’ (1; see also 244). A further and even more telling way in which the discourse of buying a Parisian life is undercut is the emphasis on competence, both linguistic and cultural. When her husband makes the argument that the customer—the one with the money—has the upper hand in the real estate office, she questions it:

‘Don’t worry so much,’ says Jack, ‘You’re trying to *buy* an apartment. It doesn’t matter how much of the language you speak; they’re still going to be keen to sell you one.’

‘Hmmm.’ That sounds okay in theory, but in practice I’m not convinced. I’ve visited Paris enough times to know that my right to purchase a Camembert will be jeopardised if I seem unable to consume it properly. (22)

Purchasing in Paris requires certain forms of cultural knowledge that need to be demonstrated through language performance. Far from buying bringing belonging, it turns out that belonging—in the form of cultural and linguistic competence—is a prerequisite to buying. The only way that Ellie will succeed in ‘buying a piece of Paris’ is if she can prove her cultural competence, and the only way to prove it is linguistically. Such a purchase is a linguistic transaction first, and an economic one only after the fact. To put it in Bourdieu’s (1984) terms, economic capital is insufficient; cultural capital—in the coin of language—is what’s needed.

Judgements about the level of Ellie’s competence are made from the moment she first sets foot in a real estate office:

They wait to see what sort of foreigner I am. Am I the sort who can speak the language or not? (5)

through the visits of various properties

Too little praise? Too much? I know it's incumbent upon me to go through the process properly. [...] I'm expected to convey the air of a considered, competent purchaser. (219)

until the signing of the contract in the final pages:

I know why everyone is nervous. Monsieur has no faith in my ability to carry out this transaction. (240)

Early encounters are less than successful: 'I look at Jack helplessly. This is the third inspection that has ended with us offending someone or something' (70). Her effusive comments are seen as inappropriate (27, 62, 116, 219), and her apologies and expressions of disappointment are met with disdain (16). Clearly these are the wrong linguistic and pragmatic strategies.

In order to gain the necessary competence, Ellie develops her language skills and brings to bear her performance skills. She undertakes critical self-monitoring of her language progress and projects herself into the role of a Parisian, using techniques informed by her former career as an actress (5). Already the plan to buy the apartment stems from her 'habit of imagining [her]self in all manner of situations that are outside [her] real, everyday life' (2). Nielsen focuses on the performative aspect of the French identity to which she aspires: 'the "be yourself" idea has never really worked for me. I generally pretend to be some other, better person' (12). Again we see that acquiring Frenchness fits under a general goal of self-improvement. Nielsen's fortnight in Paris involves a good deal of role-play, in an individual-scale theatrical production on the magnificent stage of Paris. Costumes (3, 4), props (87) and timing (140) all require attention, and there is a need to imagine oneself in the role, as a competent Parisian, but the most crucial element is language.

Under the guise of acquiring an apartment, Ellie acquires the skills she lacks. Encounters with real estate agents become language lessons, pursued as much for linguistic gain as for an apartment. These conversations are opportunities to learn the vocabulary, expressions and grammar of property buying. The first agent teaches her that 'apartments in Paris are sold by the square metre' and by the number of *pièces* [rooms], not to be confused with *chambres* [bedrooms] (5). Ellie memorises useful expressions that he uses such as *Je vois* [I see], which she is able to put to good use later the same day. And she takes the reader on the same

learning journey, introducing new French words into sentences without translating, allowing the reader to puzzle over them and then learn their meaning at the same time she does, several pages later:

I stare at the small coloured photos of ancient Marais apartments. Two pièces, three pièces. 30 square metres, 75 square metres. Why haven't I noticed those measurements before? Très calme, très clair, cuisine Américaine, double séjour. Le balcon. At least I know what that is. Pierre. Pierre? Isn't that a boy's name? La poutre. They nearly all mention that. I whip my notebook from my bag and write it down. Whatever it is, it must be important. (8)

Foreign words become accessible as the reader progresses. Each real estate office provides an opportunity to improve her skills: 'Paris is full of agences immobilières. I'll practise on someone else tomorrow' (18). She listens and repeats as another estate agent explains the vocabulary for different kinds of windows, at first a captive learner, but soon an enthusiastic and successful participant:

Buoyed by this micro conversation, I decide that perhaps a language lesson is, after all, what I'm here for. I ask questions about la cuisine, les salles de bains, l'état—anything I can think of. I imitate Madame's eyebrow gymnastics. I steal her words to finish my sentences. We start to speak the same language. (26)

Similarly, a shop assistant explains a gender error (58), and a florist not only insists on her learning the vocabulary for the transaction and 'stands firm' until she gets it right (57), but corrects her grammar and informs her of the conventions for dealing with estate agents. All these encounters become further occasions to practise her French.

But language learning is far from being merely cognitive in the memoir; it is also corporeal, sensual. Mastering French is a process involving the whole body. Comprehension requires physical effort: 'I have to listen with every pore of my body just to understand the edges of what is being said' (63). Even faking comprehension is a muscular activity—'I continue my facial gymnastics, even attempting a lip purse as his monologue continues. Then I allow myself a smile' (17)—an activity that leaves physical traces: 'Every inane I-don't-have-the-vaguest-idea-what-you-mean-or-what-you're-talking-about smile carves an indelible mark around my lips. With each pretence, these etch themselves deeper into my face' (16).

Speaking similarly involves exertion with the 'eyebrow gymnastics' (26) mentioned earlier, and results in palpable pleasure: 'Métro Maubert Mutualité is straight ahead. All those lovely "M"s. I can feel their hum on my lips' (146). Words are tangible, occupy her body and then spurt spontaneously from within. The frustration when 'the words inside my head [...] prefer to stay there' (65) dissipates when they flow freely: 'Très joli, très calme, très lumineux. All my practised real estate words come tumbling out of my mouth' (116). Ellie experiences the highs and lows of the roller coaster ride of language progress, in which 'I battle along with my stop-start language' (82) gives way a few lines later to 'I'm revelling in the way I'm keeping up with Claude's monologue' (82).

The elation produced when language pours forth propels her whole body through the streets of the city:

C'est la belle vie! This is the life! Did I say that? I almost skip through the passage that leads to rue Saint-Antoine. I didn't even know I knew that. C'est ma belle vie! C'est incroyable. There's another one. Just like that. (9)

Whether speaking or being spoken to, language pushes her along:

Bonjours to madames and monsieurs bounce out of the shops and cafés as we pass. [...] For the first time in nearly two weeks I'm walking at the same pace as the rest of Paris. [...] I would be perfectly happy to just keep walking because today Paris is wooing me. At least five 'bonjour madames' in one morning. (154–55)

It opens the doors of the city:

Allez. Did I say that? It takes me a moment to translate. Allez? My go-on voice is speaking to me in French. J'y crois pas! I move towards the door of the gallery. It springs open at my touch. (198)

This occurs the day before Ellie's departure. Again, the activity is ostensibly a purchase, of a sculpture in this case:

We talk about the sculptor and his work [...]. We talk about shape and space and distant continents. My adult brain stops scolding my infant tongue. Our conversation, these precious scraps of words, thrills me. Now, when I'm about to leave, I find my voice. I make mistakes, everywhere, but I plough on. I just want to keep talking. I'll talk about anything. Anything to keep me here, just a little longer. (199)

Language is voice, tongue, scraps; it is material, embodied, a source of intense pleasure never quite controlled by the brain.

The plan to buy an apartment in two weeks falls through, and Ellie returns to Australia, but maintains her newfound facility in French. The phone rings:

I surprise myself with a rush of sentences. I thought I'd forgotten all that. I thought I'd left all those French sentences in Paris. [...] I catch a glimpse of my reflection in the door of the microwave. I'm standing in my Melbourne kitchen speaking in a foreign language. I'm not translating. I'm talking and listening. In French. Je parle bien français. (210–11)

Her ability to speak French effects a visible transformation, and her fluency gives her the confidence to get back in touch with the real estate agent and buy the apartment. Back in Paris to sign the contract, she finds she has achieved what she wanted: 'I don't feel incompetent, inadequate or excluded. I feel vital: a microscopic part of Paris' swirling, luminous life' (217). But although, once again, the purchase is said to be the key to this feeling of belonging, it is her ability to participate in the linguistic exchange through which the purchase takes place that gives rise to the feelings of competence, adequacy and inclusion. The language coursing through her whole body has made the entire event possible.

But this narrative, whereby language is the path to purchasing an apartment and a sense of belonging is finally achieved, is only part of the story. Such a narrative makes it possible to see language merely as a necessary detour on the way to possessing real estate and feeling Parisian, leaving intact the connection between these two. This link is, however, uncoupled through references to a neighbour that Ellie dubs Monsieur le Painter, whose very existence jeopardises everything Ellie wants to believe about her project.

Monsieur le Painter

The lack of fit between buying and belonging is never stated explicitly in the memoir. Nonetheless, the lack of relevance of owning an apartment to being a Parisian is apparent in the recurring presence of a character who is the antithesis of an apartment-owner and yet is clearly far more at home in Paris than Ellie: 'The local beggar turned artist (or is it the other way

around?) has set up shop right outside the doorway' (44). He challenges her belonging on the very first day of her apartment-hunting, 'outing' her as a foreigner: 'Why are the beggars of Paris so bloody observant? [...] I blush and hurry past in case some other Parisian discovers me for the imposter I so clearly am' (7–8). He is a Parisian while she is an interloper. 'Monsieur le Painter' appears a total of 14 times in the memoir, from the second to the second-last of 35 chapters, a refrain gently mocking her project. He laughs and shouts at Ellie, unsettling her: 'He makes me fumble the door code. [...] It's mortifying to be seen quailing at your own Parisian front door' (45). The position of this homeless man at the front door—that symbol of entry to real estate (even if it's only a two-week rental at this stage)—is paradoxically more assured than hers:

'That painter's outside again,' I say as I burst into our living room.
'Why wouldn't he be?' says Julia. 'He lives here.' (45)

Despite being homeless, he is at home, whereas she is not, making it obvious that is quite possible to belong intimately in Paris without the advantage of real estate. Ellie is represented as unsure why he unsettles her. When her small son explains to a visitor that his mother hates the tramp, she responds:

'I didn't mean I hated him. I just find him ...' I look down at Ellery's frowning face, 'a bit ...' The only word that pops into my head is 'homeless'. That doesn't make sense. How could it be his homelessness that perturbs me? (76)

Ellie poses the question rhetorically, prompting the reader to join the dots and propose answers. A clue is to be found in the sparse information she gives of her background: she mentions growing up with no money and feeling 'guilt at now having some' (32) in the form of an inheritance from her mother-in-law. It is not, however, just guilt at her own privilege that flusters her, but the implicit challenge to her project that the beggar represents: the disconnect between owning a home and belonging. The challenge is never acknowledged as such; rather 'the painter' appears as a leitmotiv in her thoughts, as if, as narrator, she is not consciously aware that the belonging she seeks—feeling at home in Paris—is not guaranteed by the purchase of an apartment. This is most obvious in a prolonged passage in a stream of consciousness style in which her musings on real estate are intertwined with and repeatedly disturbed by thoughts of the painter:

I sit on the edge of the bed. It's a mess of real estate brochures and guides. I pick one up and open it at random. The brochures are not what I expected. They're cheaply produced and lacking any hype. The wind outside pushes the rain erratically across the window. *Perhaps someone invited the painter into a warm, dry home. People do that in Paris.* I think I was expecting more properties to be on the market. Of course there are hundreds; but then again, there are thousands, maybe millions, of apartments here. Perhaps summer is a bad time to buy. *I can't imagine how he copes in winter. Yoann once told me that a homeless person came to live with him. He didn't say 'homeless'. That wasn't how he saw him. He was just someone without shelter. When I asked why, he shrugged at me. He told me that he met a person without a home and he gave him one. That was the beginning and the end of the story.* My eyes drift to a sunny photo of a small château somewhere near Aix-en Provence. It seems inexpensive in comparison with the fourth arrondissement. *People are always asking about his paintings. People with satchels and handbags and briefcases. Young people. Older people. People dressed in suits and jeans. Once I saw him addressing a group. He spoke in earnest. It took me back to my university days. I contrived to stand within earshot, but I didn't understand a word he said.* (50–51, italics added)

There are no italics in the passage as it appears in the memoir; the two trains of thought merge seamlessly. While she struggles to find a suitable home to buy, she imagines the painter being offered a home, being welcomed. His right to live there, his being at home with or without an address is obvious, needs no explanation or justification, is simply taken for granted. He belongs. Not only is he accepted, he is even sought out. In the final sentences we see that while the painter is at the centre of interactions with a diversity of Parisians, Ellie is marginalised, in physical proximity but socially isolated, unable to follow his words. Once again, it is her lack of language that excludes her, not her living arrangements. Her French is just not good enough to participate.

The paradox of the homeless man at home in Paris is pushed to the point where Monsieur le Painter comes to play a role in Ellie's imagined homemaking: she dreams of buying one of his paintings to put into her future Paris apartment (76, 237). Such an object would personalise the space, make it her own, make it her home, through its metonymic connection to this quintessential Parisian.

Surprisingly, given his epithet, the primary mode of Ellie's encounters with Monsieur le Painter is not visual but aural. He appears first and foremost as a voice, and a compelling one. Although a painter, he is mainly heard. It is his sounds, his words that announce his presence on each occasion: 'Some mornings I lie awake listening to him, trying to make out what he's saying. But he wails through the early morning in a language I can't understand' (45). His belonging is both established and expressed through language, but a language to which Ellie has no access. And although Ellie is able to avoid eye contact, and never stops to admire his work, she cannot avoid his screams and curses, his laughter and monologues (45).

Monsieur le Painter thus embodies the imbrication of language, home and belonging, demonstrating that wealth and consumption are not prerequisites to Parisian identity, despite the price of Paris apartments. In the first half of the book, his presence gives the lie to Ellie's apparent world view and purpose, exposes her vulnerabilities despite her privilege, thrusts her into a position of alterity. And then when he is no longer present, in the second half of the book, her thoughts continue to turn to him; she is disappointed not to see him, misses him (229). His absence where he belongs is palpable. She remembers his voice, cries when she discovers he has died. Explicitly he is said to represent for Ellie 'how crazy life's rules are' (237). This is a craziness the narrator avoids teasing out, for the absurdity is in fact the contradiction between the story she tells (belonging through language) and the story she purports to tell (belonging through buying). Cleverly crafted, the narration pursues the contradiction at a level just below Ellie's consciousness: 'What was I going to do? Rush up and tell [Monsieur le Painter] that I'd bought an apartment? [...] How ridiculous.' (230). Despite, or indeed through, her air of frivolity and denial, Ellie provides the reader with the clues to read her story against itself.

What's language got to do with it?

Mary Besemeres notes that 'It is symptomatic of the global dominance of English that questions about language and identity are largely invisible in anglophone travel writing' (2008, 245). Among the recent memoirs of Australians in France, although the encounter with French language is often evoked, its impact on identity tends to be recounted in negative terms,

when it is not simply overlooked. Acknowledgement of its transformative capacity is rare. In this corpus, where French language tends to be viewed as either an accoutrement or an impediment to communication, Nielsen's book stands out in representing language learning as enabling, even thrilling, as opening up communication and involving one's whole being to do so. And it goes further, showing how engaging with this process goes hand-in-hand with challenges to one's sense of self, to moments of self-questioning: Ellie's experiences of exclusion in comparison with even the most marginalised of Parisians interrupt her narrative, place her in a position of alterity, of vulnerability, unsettle her certainties and her worldview. In short, her language learning journey exposes her to other modes of seeing the world, of being in the world. These are the secondary benefits of language learning, benefits that go far beyond linguistic competence and impact upon one's place in and sense of connection to the world.

Emphasis on the difficulties involved in mastering a language makes language learning an easy target for Anglophones who would dismiss the need for it. And it makes it easy to miss the wider potential of the experience of otherness that it entails. *Buying a Piece of Paris* models an alternative way of negotiating language difference for the reader. But it is telling that Nielsen's language lessons are presented surreptitiously.

Chapter 5 traced the contours of a postfeminist fantasy infusing many of the memoirs of Australian women in France, with economic independence taken for granted, and an emphasis on consumerism and luxury domesticity. Nielsen flirts with this fantasy, invoking yet undermining it. Like fellow Australian Sarah Turnbull, whose intercultural insights are camouflaged among chapters celebrating French fashion and food in her bestselling memoir *Almost French* (see Chapter 7), Nielsen disguises her language learning memoir. She entices her reader to enjoy the tale of an extravagant shopping expedition. In the breathless excitement of the shopping story, however, the metamorphosis enabled by language learning risks escaping notice.

Here we see that commitment to language learning is not only rare among these memoirs, but indeed is concealed in this case. Although it is almost *de rigueur* to stress effort in dress, grooming and homemaking, it appears to be a marketing error to emphasise linguistic effort in the land of pleasure. And while France throws its fairy dust on clothes and appearance and life in general, turning them into something elegant, stylish and wonderful,

language doesn't simply follow suit; there is no magical makeover of one's conversation skills in French. There is, however, one quintessentially French product sometimes seen as partially achieving this, or at least substituting for it in some small way: wine. Emblematic of French life, *la belle vie*, of Parisian sparkle or of rustic warmth, wines and champagnes are also commonly seen as loosening the tongue: disinhibiting the speaker and facilitating fluency in a foreign language. Imbibing figures plentifully in the memoirs. Let us turn to wine, then, and the relation with alcohol for Australians in France, and ask, somewhat flippantly, 'What's wine got to do with it?'

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