

## When Judging a Book by Its Cover Is Revelatory of Cultural Interactions

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The article “(Ir)Reverently Telling The Otherness Through Paratextual Narrative” written by Nicoleta-Loredana Moroşan provides a minute analysis of the paratextual elements pertaining both to Stephen Clarke’s book *A Year in the Merde*, and to its translation in French, *God Save La France*. The book was first published in English, in 2004, under the pseudonym Paul West, while the French translation done by Léon Mercadet was published in 2006. N. L. Morosan’s analysis is conducted in the key of *cultural intelligence* and *intercultural competence*, concepts developed by Ang & Van Dyne, 2008, Ang, Van Dyne & Koh, 2006, Earley & Ang, 2003. By resorting to this theoretical framework, the author cogitates upon what makes cultural belonging come into being and how it comes across in the literary genre known as the literature of accommodation (Knox, 2003).

If you are acquainted with the long-standing frenmity between England and France, you may not be surprised by the editorial peritext of the book under discussion. On the front cover the Eiffel Tower reclines under the “weight” of two snails positioned one on top of the other, while the French word *merde* is printed in large characters on the front cover, its letters bearing the colours of the French flag. On the back cover, the symbolism segues into the same world-famous Parisian landmark which now arches itself somehow protectively over the same two snails which this time face each other, tentacles raised in confrontation. But in case you are oblivious of these cultural symbols, if you

have not heard of Stephen Clarke (or maybe you have, but you haven't read him yet) and just happen to come across this book, would you buy it? Would you read it? Would the images and the words encountered on its covers be an incentive or rather a deterrent to what could be your discovery adventure with clashing cultures?

The above-mentioned research helps readers understand the cultural elements – be they basic cultural representations or rather clichéd ones –, present both in the images on the covers of the books (the English original and its French translation) and in their blurbs, through the author's thorough examination of both the peritext (images and textual items which surround the main body of a published book) and the epitext (paratext circulating freely outside the book, virtually anywhere) of the narrative. The very title of this academic paper, “(Ir)Reverently Telling The Otherness Through Paratextual Narrative”, implies that the idea of alterity is sometimes embraced (reverently) and other times rejected (even irreverently so) by the participants engaged in cultural exchanges. The examination conducted throughout the four well-delineated sections will prove that in the novel the paratextual constituents underscore the constant paradoxical interweaving of the positive and negative attitudes towards otherness.

In Genettian fashion, N. L. Moroşan's research begins by identifying the book as a *relocation narrative*, a subgenre of travel writing (L.A. Mastelotto, 2013), anticipating the intercultural encounters that are to unfold before the reader's eyes, once the reading process is initiated. Thus the first section of this paper is called *Architextual Belonging of Stephen Clarke's A Year in the Merde*. The next one, *The Effrontery of the Title in Relation to the Cross-Cultural Experience*, precedes to the analysis of the boldness of the title of this novel, which includes the French swear-word with an obviously derogatory intent; while consisting in a combination of English and French, the title derides the French part through the semantics of the final word. The scrutiny process the title of the novel is subject to in Moroşan's paper does not fail to recall Peter Mayle's *A Year in Provence* (1989), going beyond its textual borders, into the epitext, and citing from one of Stephen Clarke's interviews, with a view to fully inform the readership on the conditions that prompted the choice of a brazen title for his work.

The next section of the article, *The Culture Clash/Encounter Prefigured by the Editorial Peritext*, introduces the reader to the book covers, explaining the cultural symbols featured by the images and the text, such as snails sporting the countries' flags on their shells or the oblique position of the Eiffel Tower. The author finds that the ensemble of icons appearing on the covers is formed of “three interconnected tiers”: the striking clichéd visual ensemble, the symbolism attached to it in this particular occurrence, by association with the accompanying text and the intentional white background against which images and texts are positioned here. The conclusions drawn with reference to this

particular peritext are also supported by external references gleaned from the rest of Clarke's work. The author invokes, for instance, Clarke's non-fiction book *Talk to the Snail. Ten Commandments for Understanding the French*.

Whilst proposing her own interpretation of the peritext, Moroşan's discourse is constantly interspersed with reflections revealing an author who is aware that there is a point where her way of decoding that or that part of the text may be just one of several possible. This awareness is made obvious in a number of ways, such as the resort to rhetorical questions. Pondering over the symbolism of the pseudonym under which the novel was first published, which is also the name of the main character in the book, Paul West, and taking the interpretation cross-language, to the idiomatic phrase "être complètement à l'ouest", Morosan raises the following questions: "Could it be that the British expat feels he is being subjected to an alienating experience in the foreign land? And if so, how will he cope with it?" (p. 8). Speaking about the curvilinear shape of the Eiffel Tower as featured on the back cover, she wonders: "Does its position simply imply that the French values are more and more declining? Or could it hint, given the unavoidable human subjectivity, at a certain degree of distortion of truth, inherent to the attempt of individually summing up the essence of a nation, thus warning the reader to take the presentation that is to be read with a grain of salt?" (p. 11). Approaching the *Modalities of Rendition of the Culture Clash/Encounter Prefigured by the Paratext in the French Translation* in the fourth section of the paper, and dwelling on the interlinguistic interaction in the title in the French version *God Save la France*, the author comments: "The speech act entailed by the title of the anthem, in connection to its verses, is that of a wish or a plea. In ironic counterpoint, in the hypertext under discussion it becomes a wish addressed to divinity as a last resort, God being the only one who can still bring light upon this country. And since the prayer is uttered in English, could it mean that the salvation could only come from the other side of the Channel?" (p. 12). Following this train of thought, we could reach the conclusion that there are no definite answers, only more food for thought.

Towards the end of her paper, Nicoleta Moroşan also includes an analysis of the paratext in the French translation, *God Save La France*, comparing the titles, the iconography and the blurbs of the two versions of the book. She duly remarks that the scatological reference of the title is no longer there, but the mixture of languages remains, though in an apparently reverent way this time. This discussion about the reasons underlying the interweaving of the two languages is prolonged by the explanation of the idioms encountered in the blurb ("to take a French leave" vs "filer à l'anglaise") or the CV template extract on the back cover of the French translation. The acclaiming phrases of the front and back covers of the novel, as well as the blurb on the latter, comprising a mix of free indirect discourse and third person presentation in the English version are also attentively looked into both as speech acts and as

paradoxical occurrences of symbols which validate and contrast each other at the same time.

To conclude, Nicoleta-Loredana Moroșan's article on the paratext of this relocation narrative fully informs the reader, in an academic style, regarding the cultural symbols of France and Great Britain, both at linguistic level and at the synergetic level of the visual and social impact a book cover can have on any buyer/reader. It also intimates that cross-cultural experiences are valuable and should be deemed and taken as such, regardless of the more or less brutal and (self)derisive fashion a writer chooses to adopt when telling their stories. "Viewed as frenemies, the two cultures appear yet unable to avoid staying in touch. But beyond this or that reproof of local aspects, the butt of ridicule is anyone who takes themselves too seriously, missing the essential moral of their cross-cultural experiences, whatever nationality they may be." (p.14)

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