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2021

### Crossfires: Foreign Souls and Lands' and Feminist Modernist Recovery in Translation

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#### Recommended Citation

Levin, Sophie, "Crossfires: Foreign Souls and Lands' and Feminist Modernist Recovery in Translation" (2021). *Neureuther Book Collection Essay Competition*. 71.

<https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/nbcec/71>

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"Crossfires: Foreign Souls and Lands" and Feminist Modernist Recovery in Translation

It might not be as logical as alphabetical order, but I have always found it particularly satisfying to group my books together by series so that they form a perfectly even and uniform mass on my bookshelf. As an undergraduate, my shelf was mostly composed of matte black Penguin Classics, but over the years I have added a bright row of color-blocked spines from NYRB Classics and a monochrome row of dove grey Persephone reissues of neglected writing by women. The title of this essay takes its name from a book series that first captured my attention about a year ago, « Feux Croisés : âmes et terres étrangères » (Crossfires: Foreign Souls and Lands) from Librairie Plon.

I came across my first Feux Croisés novel on WorldCat—where else?—while researching British writer Hope Mirrlees for a term paper. Mirrlees is one of the success stories of feminist modernist recovery work: influential in her own time but excluded from the male-dominated canon by mid-century academics; today, she is relatively well known within modernist studies for *Paris. A Poem* (1920).<sup>1</sup> The poem was published by Leonard and Virginia Woolf's Hogarth Press in an edition of 175 copies, one of which currently resides in our very own Olin Library Special Collections. I spent a lot of time with Mirrlees's poem this past summer working on a digital edition of the poem lead by Melanie Micir through the Humanities Digital Workshop. Although *Paris* has been an object of significant scholarly attention in recent years, almost no one has written about Mirrlees's novel *The Counterplot* (1924), likely because it has been out of print for nearly a hundred years. While searching for a copy of the book to request via Inter-Library Loan, I discovered that the most recent edition was a 1929 French translation under the

title *Le choc en retour*, translated by a woman named Simone Martin-Chauffier under Plon's Feux Croisés series.

The limited information I found on WorldCat really sparked my imagination. I wanted to know more about Mirrlees's French translator, the circumstances under which the collaboration between the two women writers came about, and the publishing imprint that gave this collaboration a venue. As Virginia Woolf famously put it, one might only need a room of one's own and an independent income of 500 pounds a year to become a writer, but publishing a translation involves many more moving parts. After not a small amount of literary detective work, I discovered that Mirrlees's novel came to Plon through Charles Du Bos, a literary critic and noted Anglophile. Du Bos first met Mirrlees at an annual literary retreat at a former Cistercian monastery called Pontigny through a tangled net of Bloomsbury connections. He acquired her novel for the international literature series he directed at Plon, then under the title « Collection d'auteurs étrangers » (Collection of Foreign Authors). Du Bos secured Simone Martin-Chauffier, wife of fellow Pontigny attendee Louis Martin-Chauffier, to complete the translation—the couple would later become members of the French Resistance during World War II. In 1926, Du Bos passed the series on to Gabriel Marcel, a literary critic, playwright, and Christian existential philosopher who relaunched it under the new title « Feux Croisés : âmes et terres étrangères » (Crossfires: Foreign Souls and Lands). Marcel published Simone Martin-Chauffier's translation of Mirrlees's 1924 novel with a rapturous afterward by Charles Du Bos in 1929.

While my interest in Feux Croisés began with a single novel, several factors held my attention after my term paper was finished and inspired me to start a collection of books from the

series. In the discipline of Comparative Literature, we often talk about the concept of "world literature"—how worlds are constituted, what counts as world literature, who does the deciding, and what elements of power are involved in the process.<sup>2</sup> Feux Croisés creates its own "literary world" with a corpus of texts drawn from different languages and national traditions, all placed together on the same footing in neatly designed, accessibly priced paperbacks decades before the first university Comparative Literature department. In Gabriel Marcel's writing about the series, he discusses bringing international perspectives to domestic readers, cultivating cosmopolitanism rather than nationalism, and the positive effects of *dépaysement* or displacement—he reads like the course description of an Introduction to World Literature syllabus.<sup>3</sup> Marcel's catalog leaves much to be desired in terms of non-European texts and perspectives, but read in tandem with his reflections, the Feux Croisés collection provides a valuable snapshot of how world literature was made manifest in a specific place and time.

Another reason that Feux Croisés appeals to me is the catalogue's relative gender parity, considering the expectations of the time period. In addition to Hope Mirrlees, Feux Croisés published translations of novels by modernist women writers, including Margaret Kennedy, Rosamond Lehmann, Stella Benson, Clemence Dane, and Sylvia Townsend Warner. Sadly but perhaps unsurprisingly, the women writers published by Feux Croisés are today less canonical and less valued than their male counterparts. The silver lining of this inequality is that I have been able to purchase affordable copies of the Feux Croisés catalog of women writers. Almost all of the English-language novels by women published in French translation by Feux Croisés would go on to be reissued by the feminist press Virago under their Virago Modern Classics series, established in 1978 to promote forgotten and neglected works by women. Feux Croisés

was not a feminist press by any means; Marcel and his colleagues simply printed books by women authors that aligned with their mission of introducing the French reading public to diverse international perspectives. Feux Croisés found an admirer in Simone de Beauvoir, who claims in her autobiography to have read all of the Feux Croisés translations and even cites several of them in the "Lived Experience" volume of *The Second Sex* (1949) as fictional illustrations of women's real-life experiences.<sup>4</sup> Marcel might not have had explicitly feminist intentions, but the translations he published certainly had feminist reverberations.

In my reading on Feux Croisés, I have discovered a number of interesting literary connections that feel like the starting point of a promising future research project. Strictly speaking, no research project requires me to have on hand physical copies of Feux Croisés translations.

Instead, I collect them because I love being able to touch copies of the same material objects that I can imagine Simone de Beauvoir flipping through in Adrienne Monnier's La Maison des Amis des Livres on the Left Bank of Paris in the 1930s. Of course, it is also possible to have this kind of affective connection with a book via a contemporary edition or even an eBook. Still, there is something special to me about the tangible interaction of seeing, touching, and even smelling an old book, especially when the title has long since fallen out of print and beyond the pale of scholarly attention. I have purchased each of my Feux Croisés books for no more than €15 from various used book sites, essentially the equivalent of a contemporary new hardcover, and they have a special aura about them precisely because they are overlooked and undervalued by other people. For me, it has been immeasurably valuable to accompany my academic research on feminist modernist recovery with the personal joy of discovering these lost and forgotten Feux Croisés editions and displaying them proudly on my bookshelf.

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1 Julia Briggs championed Hope Mirrlees and contributed an annotated version of *Paris. A Poem.* to Bonnie Kime Scott's anthology *Gender in Modernism: New Geographies, Complex Intersections* (Indiana UP, 2007) that initiated a new wave on scholarly interest in Mirrlees in the following years.

2 Anca Parvulescu has worked on a Romanian novel published by Plon under the *Feux Croisés* series, and I am grateful to her for suggesting that I think of *Feux Croisés* as a world literature series.

3 Gabriel Marcel writes about the series fondly in his autobiography, published in English translation as *Awakenings* (Marquette UP, 2002) and his reflections on the series in internal communications and press materials are cited at length by Patricia Sorel in her French-language history of the publishing house *Plon : Le sens de l'histoire (1833-1962)* (Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2018).

4 In the same paragraph, Beauvoir also mentions having read the more canonical British modernists Virginia Woolf, Rebecca West, and Dorothy Richardson. For the full citation see Beauvoir's *La Force de L'Âge* (Gallimard, 1960) pp. 61.