

Ideas Podcast Transcript

Marshall Poe

Welcome to the new books Network.

Hello, everybody. This is Marshall Poe. I'm the editor of the New Books Network and this is an episode in the Princeton University Press Ideas Podcast brought to you by our friends at Princeton University Press in conjunction with the New Books Network. And I'm very happy to say that today we have Richard Scholar on the program and we'll be talking about his terrific book, *Émigrés: French Words That Turned English*. It came out from Princeton University Press in 2020. Welcome to the show, Richard.

Richard Scholar

Thank you very much indeed for having me.

Marshall Poe

My pleasure. Could you begin the interview by telling us a little bit about yourself?

Richard Scholar

Yes. Well, I'm a writer/translator and I am a professor of French at Durham University in the UK. I moved to Durham in 2019 having spent the previous 13 years at Oxford.

I have long been fascinated by the connections between French and its neighboring cultures including English. My undergraduate training is in English and French. So, I suppose that's my sort of potted biography which also explains something of why I was interested in writing this book.

Marshall Poe

I kind of want to talk to you about the expression “potted” history because that's not an American expression but I hear it a lot in England but we won't go there. I just find that fascinating. Where does that come from? But why did you write *Émigrés: French Words That Turned English* and what were you hoping to accomplish with the book?

Richard Scholar

Well, I should start by adding a footnote to my biography, which is that I co-direct an international research project called Early Modern Keywords and that takes us into the book, Early Modern Keywords being a study of words that people share as they discuss the central processes of their common life. Early Modern Keywords is a project which takes in many different languages. My particular interest is in French, but French as it connects to its neighboring cultures and languages. So, I wanted to write the book because I suppose I wanted to contribute to the whole project of thinking about keywords, these words that we use, as we discussed, the central processes of our common life, words that we share, but that also sometimes put us at odds with one another since we have different ways of understanding the same words. These words also change a lot over time.

I wanted to, I suppose, cause speakers of English to reflect that many of the key words that they use come to English from outside. They come to English from their neighboring foreign languages and none more so than from French, which is the language that has lent more words to English than any other modern foreign language. So, I wanted to invite English speakers as well as all speakers to think about this phenomenon and to reflect on what it has to say about neighboring languages and cultures, in particular Anglophone cultures all over the world as they've connected, related to, borrowed from, adapted words from France and from the French.

Marshall Poe

I would say that about 40% of the words you just use probably came from French.

Richard Scholar

Yes. Absolutely. Actually, all of the nouns in the first sentence of the book I borrowed from French at some point in the history of English. Some of them remain, if you like, floridly or obviously French. So we might use them as we use them in English. We might try to effect a French accent even or renounce them, you know, show that they remain French.

Other words that we have borrowed in English from French have just been seamlessly absorbed into the English Language by now. We'd have no, absolutely no sense that they were French. I mean, you and I are in the middle of having a conversation and in the 17th century, the word "conversation" would have struck English speakers as floridly French. So that's just one example of many words that for English speakers today have nothing as it were French about them. Whereas when we meet at the beginning of a conversation having never met before and say to one another "enchanted" or something like that, we're visibly and audibly borrowing a French word into English.

Marshall Poe

I have a friend who recently said to me, "Marshall, you're really big on the [unintelligible]." He was showing off that he knew that. It does mark a register. I mean, that told me something about him. I already knew a lot about him.

Richard Scholar

I think that's actually an absolutely crucial element of what I wanted to point out in the book, which is that using a foreign word in English always positions the speaker in respect of access to education, access to the foreign, and also, by the way, positions the listener or the interlocutor. Because when the speaker chooses to use a word or borrow a foreign word in that way, they're also communicating something and if the listener understands, then the listener also at some level has confirmed their access to the foreign language or to the education that goes with that.

So there's always, in English I think, as it relates to French, notably a kind of question about socio-cultural privilege, access to education, and all of those things-- class, you know, often French is, at least in its relation to Norman going centuries back, it marks your position in the ruling class in England. So there's something residually that remains the case about that even to this day and perhaps was at play in your conversation with your friend.

Marshall Poe

I think this fellow was just joking with me a little bit. He was sort of making fun of my own pretensions, but I am reminded of something that I learned in graduate school. I come from the kind of American equivalent of what I think you would call the Midlands. It was a rural area in the United States, Kansas, and I don't think I ever met anyone who spoke a foreign language before I got to college. I remember when I was first reading early modern history that there would be these journal articles about French history and they would be in English but then there would be a long passage in French as if I knew French and I did not know French because people that read those kinds of articles know French, but I didn't.

Richard Scholar

So there's a whole question about to what degree one really needs the foreign language, the foreign term, the foreign phrase, and if it's needed, to what degree is one calling on this element, this

foreign element in language, in a way that's going to be accessible to the interlocutor or to the reader. And you know one of the things that really interests me is the question that poses to not just speakers of English but actually to writers of English, to artists. You know, to what degree do they really need this foreign term? What is it doing? What is it adding that's different to the language and to what degree are they making something of that? So that it remains a truly communicative act to the interlocutor, to the reader, to the audience.

Marshall Poe

Yes. Yes. I had a professor, a beloved Professor, really a genius of a guy who used to say if someone leaves a word untranslated in a scholarly article, it means that they don't know what it means. I'm not sure that's true, but.

Richard Scholar

I'm not sure it's true either, but I think it's a good test of the untranslated word in a sense. I mean, the term that's often used these days for these words that remain residually untranslated is to call them untranslatables, and it's been a whole body of work done in recent years, which says that some keywords of language are untranslatable. So I don't think untranslatable means that they are necessarily impossible to translate but it's like there's something about their meaning that is difficult to translate from one language to another. And that sort of justifies, if you like, the recourse to the untranslated word, it has some degree of untranslatability, which means that it's used in or taken out of one language and used in another.

One of the things that I constantly observed as I was working on this book was the way in which the untranslated term often travels in the company of a native synonym. So, you know, for example, one of the words I wrote about in the book is the word "ennui" which often travels in the company of other words, like boredom or apathy or indolence, or lethargy. There's a series of synonyms or near synonyms in English that travel alongside in the sentence a lot and next to the word ennui and that color the word ennui but that also are changed by the companionship of ennui in the sentence.

So it's quite different to say, you know, in English, "What is wrong with you?" and then, "Well, I'm feeling a bit bored" on the one hand, and on the other side say, you know, "Yes, this is a boredom that smacks to me of ennui."

Yeah, so to prepare those words adds a kind of coloration to the meaning of the English word as well as to the French word and suggests something that is more than either of those words taken on their own can capture. And it's that way in which language is so flexible of being combined, put together and so on, so is to capture nuance of meaning that, that's an interesting feature of this of this entire project.

Marshall Poe

Yeah, I know just what you mean. There again, I'm a Russianist, there are words, one, I can think of in particular, the word is "blat," and what it means is influence, improper influence and essentially it grew up in a context in which bribery of certain sort was rife. Now it's not right for the United States. So it is kind of untranslatable this word, "blat" because we just don't do that in the United States but in the Russian context, it's very evocative and it has a very specific meaning. It means improper influence but "improper influence" doesn't exactly roll off the tongue in English.

Anyway, I want to get to definitions before we go on. The linguists might be interested in this. In your usage, what is an *Émigré* word?

Richard Scholar

So an *Émigré* word is something I touched on earlier when I said that there are some words that travel, if you like, that if we're using the metaphor of seeing words as people, that migrate as it were from one language to another and I said to you before that, you know, French has lent many such words to English.

Émigrés words are those words within that broad category of words that have migrated. They are words that have remained residually French in English, words like "caprice" or "ennui" as I just mentioned or "naivety" or phrases like "à la mode." So these are words that as we use them in English, we retain or recall something of the French province of that term. And obviously, I invented or borrow the word *Émigrés* to capture, to describe these particular words, because of course, the word *Émigré* is itself an example of what I'm describing.

So, an *Émigré* word is a French foreign borrowing that has moved from French into English and retained something of its provenance.

Marshall Poe

Right, but the important distinction, if I understand correctly, is it continues to be marked versus unmarked as French. So to give an American example, I'm willing to bet that a lot of people don't know that the word burrito is a Spanish word. Because it refers to a burrito. And that's like, a really American thing. A burrito is not marked anymore.

Richard Scholar

Yes. Okay. So I think that's exactly right. It's the marking. Yeah, that constant determines or defines this as an emigre word. Now, of course, there's something approximate about this designation because almost as I think your example of the burrito might suggest, in different situations different language users are more or less aware of the residually or an element of the phrase. And so we're dealing here with the kind of spectrum of usage in which at the one end you have words that have been entirely naturalized in the language and on the other hand and you have words that remain resolutely kind of foreign elements and then there's lots of stuff in between which is somewhere between those two ends of the spectrum. I suppose the words that I've particularly been interested in tend to be words that are towards the rigid residually foreign element of the spectrum. Although in some cases, they shift around.

So if I may, if I can add to your burrito example, one of my own it would be, so maybe after you, I don't know if it would be the same at a diner in the US, that after you've had a burrito, you might like to have apple pie to finish for dessert. Well, I was going to mention this example, you know, if you have any diner and have apple pie with ice cream, it's, it's apple pie, obviously à la mode.

Okay, well, "à la mode" is a French borrowing, which has come into English, which came into the English language in the course of the 17th century, which has had all sorts of different meanings, but essentially has to do with yeah, to do with marking something as being in some sense fashionable, or after the fashion.

But, you know, I think that in most US American diners most of the time, when you ask for apple pie à la mode, you're not in any way signaling or marking your apple pie as being residually French just as you probably don't when you have French fries.

But when I excavated the history of the phrase "à la mode" I found it being used in all sorts of ways in English which do continue to mark the residual or the initial Frenchness of that phrase and not just in English either, by the way. "A la mode" travels all over the world and gets into German even before it does into English and other Germanic languages. So this connects to a much broader story, a historical phenomenon which has to do with the exportation in the 17th and 18th centuries of

French culture across the world as being at some level that, you know, setting the fashion for polite and civilized society the world over. And so if languages or the word receive French “a la mode” it's because they're all looking to France as a model of cultural elegance or sophistication and so on. And the English story and the Anglophone story is just a part of that.

Marshall Poe

So yeah, I mean at the time in the 17th century, French was a prestige language. And in the early 18th century as well, you know, at the Russian Court, they spoke French. So it was a very prestigious language.

Richard Scholar

French is the language of international diplomacy throughout that period.

This has to do with, if you like, the Hardy economic power and political might of France in the area of domination in Europe and then its colonial expansion across all sorts of parts of the world.

All of this predates the rise of Britain as an imperial power and so in some respects this story I'm telling is buried actually for many in the contemporary moment, by the subsequent rise of Great Britain first as an imperial power and then the United States, obviously in the 20th century, which in, English is the first language.

So I wanted to rewind the clock to that point at which it's France that occupies that position of not just political power, but also soft cultural power and is a kind of model to which other countries look. I wanted to think about the ambivalence that cultural dominance awakens in the little island next door to France.

Marshall Poe

We should also spare a thought for modern editors, because I used to edit an academic journal. And so, when I would come upon a word like “ennui” the question is, is that italicized or not?

Richard Scholar

I would add that to what we were saying earlier about markers. So we were saying earlier about how you mark in speech a word as having a foreign provenance or resonance, but the same question applies typographically when you're then deciding how to set that word in print. I had all sorts of fun actually with my copy editors and typesetters at Princeton University press exploring exactly the question that you just pose Marshall. To what degree are we thinking about this word as foreign and therefore, you know, if we're going to apply to it the sort of the convention that foreign terms in English are italicized...

Marshall Poe

I got no good solution for this. So copy editors everywhere: good luck.

Richard Scholar

Yeah. And you know I was saying earlier that words occupy a spectrum and obviously in this respect the binary of italicized or not italicized, Roman, is not very capable of capturing a binary, maybe introduce a sort of semi-italicized.

Marshall Poe

Make the editors even more miserable. Let's talk about the 17th century because that's crucial for your book and the court of Charles the Second. This was a moment at which the introduction of these French terms had a kind of heyday, and you talk about a couple of people: John Evelyn and

John Dryden. Can you explain why it was the case that the court of Charles the Second was sort of a hotbed of this sort of thing?

Richard Scholar

Yes. I mean there's a obviously a long prehistory to that moment of the court of Charles the Second. So, Charles the Second is obviously the second of the Stuarts to rein in England. His father, Charles the First was married to a French Catholic princess and so there's an earlier phase of the Frenchification of the English court in the 17th century, through the wife of Charles the First. Then, Charles the First loses out in the English Civil War. He was deposed and beheaded and his son Charles flees to France and spends the extraordinary and turbulent middle part of the 17th century in France. So he looks across to England and sees Cromwell and his parliamentarians in charge of the English Republic.

And it's only in 1660 when Charles returns to England and restores the Stuart monarchy, giving this period its conventional historical name of the English Restoration, it's only at that moment that Charles comes back to England. What he brings back with him to England is all of the experience, the access to France and the French culture that he's enjoyed personally during his years at the court of his cousin Louis XIV of France, but also a whole retinue and array [unclear] as the French would say, of Port years who've had spent the interregnum, the Republic, the years in Exile in France and the French court. And so what you have is this extraordinary moment when the restoration of the monarchy in England brings with it a new high Watermark of Frenchification of English courtly culture and manners.

And that inspires a great deal of worry and a great deal of resistance among many people in England, even as it expresses the admiration of the English rule in classroom. So it's viewed by many at some level as a kind of influx of foreign influence, which is all too redolent of that founding moment in British history centuries back: the Norman Conquest of England. So lots of people see this moment of restoration as in fact nothing other than a second Norman Conquest and want to resist it on their own terms. Let us not forget that what is coming back into fore in English culture and society along with French influence is Catholic influence.

There's a very strong suspicion among many opponents of Charles the Second that he's not only Frenchifying in his manners but also covertly Catholic, and this is a period in England where obviously there's a very long running but very explosive tension between Protestantism and Catholicism and the previous parliamentarians on the Protestant period are at the end of this spectrum.

Often with language contact you also have contact between religious cultures as well. All of that leads to a moment of both great receptivity towards French language and culture in England, but also a great resistance to it and it's that mixture, that unresolved tension and conflict between the receptivity and resistance that so interests me in the way in which Anglophone speakers constantly seem to relate to French culture.

So, I mean, I'm describing here a very specific late 17th century moment, but I think it touches on a much more long-running and abiding ambivalence in Anglophone culture towards the French and the language that they speak.

Marshall Poe

So when they started to introduce these words then a number of words become, I want to say "Au courrant." They start to use these words and there are different reactions. I mean Evelyn if I understand correctly wanted to create an English version of the French Academy which is sort of, I don't know, my American perspective is the language police. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Richard Scholar

Yes, so John Evelyn is a really good example of what we're talking about here. John Evelyn is an extraordinary man, he is a polymath interested in all sorts of different areas of learning, is very important in the history of gardening. He's a translator of many texts from French into English.

He's a fellow of the early Royal Society. The Royal Society is created by Charles II in order to bring essentially Britain into competition and emulation with France. I mean, France has gone through a much greater period of political stability. It has established academies in all kinds of areas of learning and enterprise and science and so on. And those are helping the country to modernize, to bring new ideas to the fore, and so on.

Charles does the same in England. He and his people create the Royal Society. One of the things that the Royal Society has asked to think about is whether English is a language that's capable of delivering logical, scientific, philosophical, literary, cultural and other progress to the country. And there's a very widespread feeling in England that English isn't yet up to the job, that English lacks a technical, philosophical, and literary vocabulary which would enable it to make that kind of progress.

So there's this very interesting chapter in the history of the early Royal Society where a small committee is formed, you know, 17th century academics, it seems, behaved in the same way as 21st century academics. A committee formed to consider what needs to be done for the purposes of improving the English language. And John Evelyn is polymathic figure and a fellow of the Royal Society and is asked to join the committee.

Now it turns out that the committee's going to meet on Tuesday afternoons, and John Evelyn can't make Tuesday afternoons, he's got something else to do. And so as a result, he writes a letter to the chairman of the committee setting out what he thinks his answer to the question is of, you know, what needs to be done in order to improve the English language. It's thanks to that letter that we have a very clear idea of what Evelyn's views were. I don't think we'd have that idea if he just sat in on the committee and spoken to it.

His view is that English does indeed lack words that will enable it to make progress in terms of its philosophical, technical, and its cultural activity. But more broadly, I think he also thinks that English lacks the institution which would enable that vocabulary to be brought into English, to be introduced in a way that was durable and useful. That's where he looks across to one of these academies created in France, the famous Académie Française, the French Academy, which is concerned with the language itself and the improvement of the French language. Evelyn thinks we don't just want the French words or some French words to come over here, we also want the institution, we want to translate into English, the institution that enables the language to be improved and cultivated in ways that will be durable. And so that's the burden of his letter to the chair of this committee. Now the idea came to nothing I think more or less, and so did the committee.

So we have a very different history of the language in England where we don't have the same institutional overview, we have a much more fluid and much more diverse sort of set of initiatives over the intervening centuries. But, I think that Evelyn's letter catches something of what I was just talking about earlier which is that sense that Britain in the late 17th Century needs to look across the channel to France. Also, by the way, to Spain and to Italy, to learn from these neighboring cultures better ways of doing and saying than currently exist back home.

Marshall Poe

Yeah. Then kind of on the other side of the aisle, you have someone like Dryden and he satirizes the use of French if I understand correctly. I've not read these plays or stories. But he makes fun of this kind of French pretension. Can you talk a little bit about that? I don't know if pretension is the right word.

Richard Scholar

Yes, I mean Dryden's playing a very clever game. He's criticizing French culture with a forked tongue because even as he criticizes it, he's also doing it himself, you know. So Dryden writes plays like a play I write about in the book and that is really central to this whole issue is Dryden's play *Marriage a La Mode*. We're back to "a la mode."

I'm sure the ice cream is served towards the end because it is a very happy ending that the play had. In the meantime, you have a story. One of the main plot strands in that the play features a young woman, a sort of well-to-do urban woman, but who doesn't have access to the court.

Marshall Poe

So she's a [unintelligible].

Richard Scholar

[Unintelligible]. Yeah. There are all of these fancy words for these people. This of course, is also a highly rigidly hierarchical court culture; people want to come up into that culture. How do they come it up into that culture? Well, by having money, but also by imitating the manners of the courtly culture to which they want to belong. It's like, you know, how you get into the in club is by learning to imitate the manners and the codes of the in club. Well, this is an in club that speaks in French, in which French is fashionable. French is itself "a la mode." So this young woman, Melantha, is her name. She's a figure in the play who is the sort of target, if you like, of Dryden's satire of social climbers in England, who season their conversation with far too much French because they're desperate to make it upwards, be upwardly mobile in English society.

So she has a maid and one of the jobs that this maid has, as well as making sure that her dress and her toiletry is up to scratch, her other job is to bring to her mistress everyday new French words with which to season her English conversation. And of course, the maid is in many ways, much cleverer than her mistress, so understanding lots of these words means being able to do clever things with them. But what all of this enables Dryden to do is at once to show that he is at the kind of forefront of fashionable English civility. He has all of the access to French learning that is prized at core. He's finely attuned to courtly sensibility, enough that he can criticize the abuses of friendship occasion in England, and through all of that process, I think he's partly also communicating a very particular English way of interacting with French culture, which is to both borrow from it while also resisting its dominance, you know, by showing at some level that we can take it or we can also leave it or we can order it in our own way.

So that's the kind of over plot of this or part of this, the plot of this play. There's a covert plot though which I talk about in the book which is that one of the things that Dryden doesn't share with his reader is that Dryden himself in designing the plot of this play, was borrowing silently from the French comedies of the day, comete comedies, like the very famous comedies of Molière.

One of the really relevant ones here is Molière's play *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*. *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* is exactly the figure of the social climber in French society. He's a Bourgeois. He's a well-to-do urban person but he is desperate to make it up into the aristocracy, that's why he is a bourgeois gentilhomme, I mean, these are a contradiction in terms. So Molière is satirizing the bourgeois gentilhomme in France and Dryden borrows elements from that play, but also from other

plays by Molière and also other parts of other French writers of the time. So, Dryden is himself borrowing, importing from French culture, even as he satirizes the abuse of that in the play.

Marshall Poe

That's great, that's fascinating. And then later, it will be re-written in an entirely different context as *Pygmalion*. No, no French there, but the same sort of deal?

Richard Scholar

Yeah, I mean, one of the most exciting things about working on this book was the chance, I mean I didn't take this study in the direction of *Pygmalion*, it's a really, really interesting thought, but you know, one of the great excitements of this project for me was the chance I had to follow these words across time and across space.

Marshall Poe

So let us actually do that very briefly because we already have talked for a while. Can you give us a potted history for the word that I never know how to pronounce: naïve.

Richard Scholar

Well it's got an "f" if it's masculine in French and then a "vee" if it's feminine but obviously then it gets the noun. "Naivety" takes this to the "vee." So yeah. It's one of those words that by the way, behaves in the way I was describing earlier: it moves around a spectrum of adaptation. So, you know, do you spell naivety in English with an E acute on the end? Or do you replace that with a Y, which is a form of naturalizing gesture?

There are hundreds of different ways of spelling "naivety" in English and that reflects the broader story I was just describing. But well, a potted history of "naïve" takes us from the moment we were just talking about when Dryden's play is one of the very first occasions, one of the first recorded instances of the word naïve. Naivety in English is one of those words that Melantha's maid gathers for her to use as a sort of floridly French term to show that she's with it in the courtly circles she wants to join.

It has a particular resonance in English, which is because of its French feeling. "Naivety" talks of what? Well, it talks of a native simplicity, that comes before the fall, if you like, and, of course, so you might think well, why do we need to use the word "naïve" or "naivety" when we could just talk about simplicity or artlessness or something like that?

But I think it's the very foreignness or the very Frenchness of "naivety" which helps here because to speak of somebody as naïve or exhibiting naivety is to show as a speaker that you are far removed from the innocent simplicity, the artlessness of which the word speaks. So there's a way in which you can put to use your place, mark the distance that you have from the simplicity of which you wish to speak. That possibility of naivety travels with the word throughout its longer history. I follow it across through right into the late 20th century to the novel by the sadly recently departed English novelist John le Carré.

John le Carré wrote a very interesting, these days little read, I think, novel in the 1970s called *The Naïve and Sentimental Lover*. What le Carré is doing there is he showing that "naïve" often travels around as part of an opposition in this case, an opposition between the naïve and the sentimental, between the artless and the artful, between the innocent and the experienced. Le Carré is a great student and lover of German literature and German thought and culture. And in fact what le Carré is doing there is making novelistic use of a famous essay by Friedrich Schiller on the naïve and sentimental in poetry where Schiller presents this as a fundamental distinction between different ways of writing poetry and different ways of relating to culture.

Schiller was of course borrowing in turn the word naive as he sets up this distinction from French culture of the 17th and 18th centuries. So there's a continuum there and what it enables Schiller to do and then what it enables le Carré to do are really the essence of subjects of the essay that I write.

And I think that what I want to say about that is that really touched a sort of root of some of the things we've talked about in this conversation, which is that le Carré is interested in an English culture of quite class conscious access to sophistication which seems often to call upon the French word. As it turns English, it also reveals something about class-based antagonisms in English and Anglophone society and points out some of the ironies at the heart of all of that.

Marshall Poe

This is for your note cards. I did note, I read an essay, there is now a technical use, kind of a sad technical use of naive in English and it refers to people who are, for example, opiate naive. That means first-time drug users and they are at particular risk. So clinicians now talk about people who are opiate naive and they're an at-risk population because they're trying essentially fentanyl-laced heroin, but they have chosen this particular word: opiate naive. That's the expression.

Richard Scholar

I should go on for the next edition.

Marshall Poe

Yeah. Right. I was just surprised to see that they had used this term because you would say inexperienced in using opium or using heroin.

Anyway, let's go on to a word, which I kind of find self-satirizing. Every time I read it, I kind of chuckle: "ennui." I'm sure I'm pronouncing it badly. But can you talk a little bit about the history of the word "ennui"? Or is that boring?

Richard Scholar

I mean, in a way of course, a word like "ennui", which is used to convey some dread, some world weariness of soul, does indeed pose the speaker and the writer and the artist a fundamental challenge. What am I going to make of this vortex of negative energy which threatens to drain my artistic work of its energy, of its creative resources.

"Ennui" is another of these words that was first spotted by John Evelyn in the late 17th century as having a kind of meaning that no existing word in English quite captures. It doesn't really get used much in English until about a hundred years later. It starts to be used in the late 18th and 19th centuries.

And what's interesting to me then is that by that stage in English, in British, and sort of the history of Anglophone, of English-speaking people all over the world is that we've got by that stage the British Empire spreading all across the world, to different parts of the world and the rise of the middle class because "ennui" is, in French culture at least, it was of the 17th and 18th centuries often really associated with people of the leisurely classes.

You know, you can't sit around suffering ennui if you're digging the fields, but by the time that the British pick up on and use it a lot in the late 18th and 19th centuries, ennui is kind of being democratized now. It's something that affects people of all classes, and I follow that story through literature but also through the extraordinary work of the visual artists working in the British tradition. So there's an extraordinary painting of 1914 by the German-born, but London-based artist, Walter Sickert simply entitled "Ennui". It's a painting that Virginia Woolf writes about in one of her

essays and has not a kind of courtly lady or a sort of aristocratic gent reclining and in a languid pose, but has a much more ordinary coupling, a drab, London parlor in a working class, or maybe lower-middle-class parlor. They are just turning away from one another as though they have nothing left to say to one another.

The man sitting at the table gazing vacantly enters into a kind of empty space and the woman is not even looking at the view, she's turned away. Ennui seems to have taken hold of them both in their domestic setting even and it has a peculiar relationship to the painting, because you look at these people and you wonder if they would ever use the word ennui and yet they are clearly [unintelligible].

It's hollowed them out and that reflects something of the artist, Sickert, who was himself, German-born, as I said, but also highly cosmopolitan. You can see this in his writing on art. He's always looking for--he is very interested in French, French literature, French novels. Someone called him Balzac translated into paint. So he's a kind of realist, if you like, of the visual arts, but calling on words that nonetheless have a kind of precision to them, even as they are distinct from the setting that he's describing.

Marshall Poe

Yeah, I was I was trying to think what is the antonym of ennui in English, and what came to mind was the English expression "get on with it."

Richard Scholar

If I may, "joie de vivre."

Marshall Poe

Yes, so I want to talk about one final word before I let you go and this is a word that I didn't associate with French at all. For me it's unmarked and that is "caprice." Can you talk about caprice? I don't think of this as a French word, really. I just, I would never as an editor, italicize it. I would never even think to italicize it.

Richard Scholar

Yeah, I think the key thing there is that you don't say "kah-price." One of the things that interests me about "caprice" is that it's not just French. It's also, this is a word that has as one of its main traveling companions, the Italian word "capriccio" which is the [unintelligible]. In fact, "caprice" in French is a borrowing initially from Italian and English culture receives, Anglophone culture receives "capriccio" and "caprice" at the same time. They are used often interchangeably and so what this enables me to show about or demonstrate about my French word that turns English is that it's lots of these words are often triangulating really. They are French, but they're also not French. They're also Italian or Spanish, or made sense of by a German writer like Schiller in the case of "naive." There's more to the cross cultural contact, in other words than just English and French. It's a more complicated picture than that. And "caprice" interested me because it crosses languages, but it also connects different forms of activity, of artistic activity across cultures. So in the 17th century, people are pointing out that a "caprice" is a kind of playful deviation from the rule. And that playful deviation from the rules is something you might do in poetry, but you might also do it in music. There are musical caprices...

Marshall Poe

Like a folly.

Richard Scholar

Yeah. A witty kind of performance, an imaginative performance that goes against or bends the rules out of shape. And you can do it in poetry, you can do it in painting, even do it in the visual arts. You can do it in cooking too, I mean there are pizza a la capricciosa available in many good pizzerias even as we speak. And it's also a kind of folly of the pizza. You take the basic ingredient and the basic pattern and then you bend it wittily out of shape. And as you do, you demonstrate your mastery of the rules even as you break them.

Marshall Poe

But that's not what it means at all today, I mean, right?

Richard Scholar

Well I mean I think again it's a complicated history, the history of "caprice" and it has a dual meaning even then. So even in the 17th century, the word has a sort of positive, cultural meaning I described. But also, what runs along with that is a negative use of the word to mean something headstrong or...

Marshall Poe

That's the way I use it.

Richard Scholar

Yeah, so, children, you know, the capricious behavior of children because they haven't yet learned to act or behave according to the rules of adult society. And there's lots of crossing over between that negative view and that positive view because you know, probably what the artist is saying is "yes, we are children." And "yes, we are going to obey our whims. We are going to but instead we're going to do it in such a way as to show that we have understood all the rules and that we were breaking the rules." Yeah, I mean I know enough children to now think that they are in exactly the same position.

Marshall Poe

I do too! I totally agree with that.

Richard Scholar

This is something that has this normative function of saying no, don't behave this way, behave that way, but then it's recuperated use by the people involved. So hold on a minute. Now I'm going to I've I understand what you're saying but I'm going to take you into a different place here.

Marshall Poe

I had not thought of that but you're right when you say, "somebody is acting capriciously" or "with capriciousness" or "through caprice," you're signaling that they know what they should be doing. But they're not doing it. And again, that word "should" is interesting there, but that reflects my usage, which is really a negative usage. I would never call somebody capricious in a positive sense. Although maybe I'm just wrong, maybe capricious is a good thing in some ways.

Well, I won't be capricious and take up too much of your time. I promised I wouldn't. Thank you very much for talking to us about the book. We have a traditional final question on the New Books Network and that is: what are you working on now?

Richard Scholar

I'm just embarking on a project which has got to do with a quite different kind of word and that's the word "utopia."

And not just the word utopia but also the book by Thomas Moore that introduces this word to describe an alternative society, a kind of alternative to the intolerable present but a good place

which is also a no place. Famously, Moore's *Utopia* is just on the edges of the known world and the word Utopia itself signals that this good place is a no place.

I'm interested in how that word, how that idea, how that work travels across the world in the early modern period after it's first published in 1516. So it's a kind of global mapping of the translations and adaptations of Moore's *Utopia* across the islands and continents of the early modern world.

Marshall Poe

That's a great project because my guess is that although it would be very easy to translate or produce a [unintelligible] of the word utopia in a language like Czech or Russian or Chinese or Japanese, I'm willing to bet that it went over whole cloth, that in Japanese utopia is utopia or whatever. I don't know what it is, in Japanese and Russian. I think it's Utopia. I could be wrong, but it's interesting. You know, there are certain words like "rocket." The word for "rocket" is always "rocket" in every language, right? There's no [unintelligible] for "rocket" and I'm not sure there was a kind of synonym for "utopia" in any of these languages prior to Moore. But it's a fascinating project.

Richard Scholar

Yeah, I can't fully answer that question but I can promise to come back in a few years.

Marshall Poe

Yeah, do actually. I'm really interested because it's a good question. Well, let me tell everybody that we've been talking to Richard Scholar about his book, *Émigrés: French Words That Turned English* from Princeton University Press. I'm Marshall Poe, I'm the editor of the New Books Network and you've been listening to the Princeton University Press Ideas Podcast. Thank you for listening. Richard, thanks for being on the show.

Richard Scholar

Thank you so much for having me.

Marshall Poe

My pleasure.