

MODERN FRENCH SEMINAR – 29/05/2008
JEAN-JACQUES LECERCLE:
MYTH, HISTORY AND FICTION: MOROZOV, FOUCAULT, RANCIÈRE

On May 29, the speaker at the Modern French Seminar was Prof. Jean-Jacques Lecercle from the University of Paris X – Nanterre. A noted specialist of linguistics, English literature and the philosophy of language, his numerous books include *The Violence of Language* (Routledge, 1990), *The Philosophy of Nonsense* (Routledge, 1994), *Interpretation as Pragmatics* (Macmillan, 1999), *L'Emprise des signes* (with Ronald Shusterman, Seuil, 2002), *Deleuze and Language* (Palgrave, 2002), and *A Marxist Philosophy of Language* (forthcoming, Brill). At the Maison Française, he chose to approach the issue of literature through contrast, starting from the non-literary perspective involved in both myth and history. He focused on the figure of Pavlik Morozov, the 14-year-old Soviet pioneer in an Ural village given iconic status by the regime after being murdered by his relatives in retaliation for reporting his father's frauds to the authorities. In the course of a dense yet lively analysis, Prof. Lecercle rehearsed the various versions of the Morozov story as they have unfolded since 1932: first, the Soviet myth of the saintly, Christ-like boy embodying a new, sacrificial proletarian heroism and glorified in an Eisenstein movie; then the counter-myth pitting "natural" Christian family values against the perverted morals of a revolutionary state; thirdly, the "real story" as disclosed by director Pekka Lehto in his 1997 documentary *Boy Hero 001*, based on the reminiscences of village elders, in which the boy Morozov appears as seeking revenge after his father has forsaken the family; a fourth version, provided by historian Catriona Kelly, relying on contextual research and supported by KGB archives which Lehto didn't have access to, suggests Pavlik's tale was an exemplary forgery since no evidence appears of the boy's snitching on his father, and concludes he died in a mundane village brawl.

Morozov's discrepant stories enabled Prof. Lecercle to unravel the tenacious attractions of a near-Freudian "myth-work" constantly displacing and condensing elements of reality, a myth-work which to this day successfully collapses politics into fuzzy emotional identification (as evinced, for instance, by the third, "truer" version which a French TV pundit predictably tagged as "tragic" and "Oedipal", or by the way American Republicans used Ashley Faulkner as a weapon against the more argumentative, programme-prone Democrats). He thus pointed to the historical, contingent aspect of both the Morozov story (unintelligible outside its context of class and ideological struggle) and our own repugnance towards "sneaking", which itself varies widely according to moral conventions (thus the father's killing of his son in Mérimée's *Matteo Falcone* is meant to elicit a sense of tragedy; Jack Straw turning his son in to the authorities, if anything, earned him accolades in the media). Caught as he is between myth (babe-in-the-wood martyr) and counter-myth (unnatural sneak), the "empirical Morozov" remains equally elusive, however, when seen through the "uncertainly truer" historical version. His only chance of appearing "real", Prof. Lecercle suggested, is through modern fiction as opposed to both myth and the historical seriousness which still fails to preclude pseudo-tragic readings – the missing fifth version which might have taken the guise of a short story in the grim vein of Maupassant or Bunin, or maybe the distant tone of Chalamov. Following Jacques Rancière, Prof. Lecercle argued that such a hypothesis did not pit fiction against history but rather hinted at their tangled, twined roots in the early 19th century, when a literary revolution abolished the distinctions between fiction and real life and made modern history possible as both writing practices broke away from the pump and circumstance of Ancien Régime narrative modes, replacing heroes with characters, foregrounding the minute and inglorious. Works like Alain Corbin's fictional *Life of Louis-Antoine Pinagot* and Foucault's projected *Vie des Hommes Infâmes* (turning the obscurities

and outcasts of the archive into literary lives) provided evidence that the modern historian's truth somehow required that sort of literature – “true fiction” – for its “establishment”.

Prof. Lecercle brought this thoroughly political lecture to a close by turning to Wittgenstein's “language games”, where truth is defined less by meaning than by use. In Morozov's case, errors have stemmed from various language games usurping on others in a confusion from which, up to now, literature has hitherto remained absent: but if myth kills politics, he concluded, the antidote to myth isn't politics or history but “truly” literature.