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Romain Gary: How to Be Someone Else

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The novelist Romain Gary had two connected but quite distinct literary careers, in two languages and under four pseudonyms. This essay will look at the way he managed to juggle these various professional identities, with a rather unique understanding of transatlantic cultural relations.

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A writer and translator, David Bellos teaches French and Comparative Literature at Princeton University. His biographies of George Perec, Jacques Tati, and Romain Gary have been translated into French, German, Italian, German, and Chinese. Other works include a study of Victor Hugo's Les Misérables and an introduction to translation studies entitled Is That A Fish in Your Ear? (2011). His latest book, Who Owns this Sentence (2024), is a cultural history of copyrights.

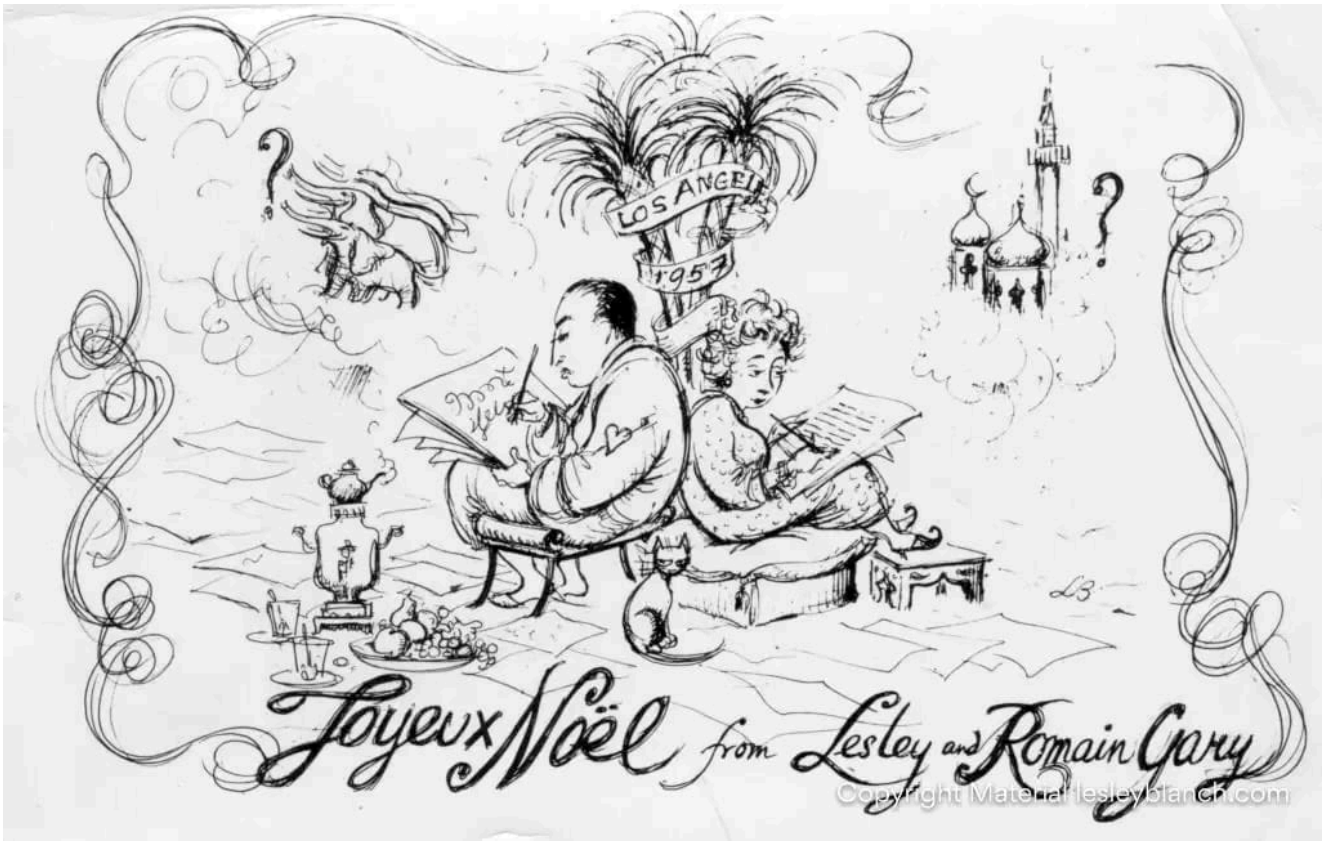
The novelist Romain Gary had two connected but quite distinct literary careers – as a writer of French, under four pseudonyms (Gary, Sinibaldi, Shatan Bogat, Emile Ajar), and as writer of English under only three (Gary, René Deville, Ajar). How he managed it, in the anecdotal sense, and how he managed it, in the professional and business sense, are the twin subjects of this paper.

His extraordinary career is not typical of Franco-American relations in the period, nor is it particularly informative about publishing history, self-translation, linguistic hybridity or other currently fashionable scholarly topics. It is perhaps best seen as an exacerbated instantiation of one of Gary's favorite clichés, *impossible n'est pas français*. At all events, it is unlikely that anyone else has ever wanted to exploit tiny loopholes in the regular channels of transatlantic cultural relations to such an extent, or that anyone ever will have the particular combination of abilities, serendipity and what in Russian is called *blat* (sheer cheek) to tie herself in knots that no boy-scout has ever had to make.

Gary, who was born Roman Kacew in 1914 in Vilna (which was then in the Russian Empire), grew up speaking Russian, Polish, and Yiddish as mother tongues, with German learned at school. He moved with his mother to France in 1928, and on first seeing pretty girls on the Promenade des Anglais in Nice, he decided that French would henceforth be his mother tongue. In his youth, he managed to get a couple of short stories published in newpapers (under his real name), but it was only toward the end of the Second World War that his career as a novelist in French took off, with the Prix des Critiques awarded for his first book, *Éducation européenne* (1945) and the Goncourt in 1956 for his ecological blockbuster, *Les Racines du Ciel*.

Many French newspaper critics treated the latter novel with unalloyed scorn (chief among them was Kleber Haedens), although many writers of high prestige, notably Albert Camus, admired it greatly. Accusations that it was poorly written and in "bad French" served as barely camouflaged code-words for saying that its author was a Jew. Coincidentally and simultaneously, Gary who had pursued a career as a diplomat since 1945, was appointed Consul-General in Los Angeles, or, as he liked to say, French ambassador to Hollywood. With breathtaking chutzpah, he resolved to answer his critics by not writing French any more. His next novel, *Lady L.* (1958), was written in English and published in the USA, where it did very well.

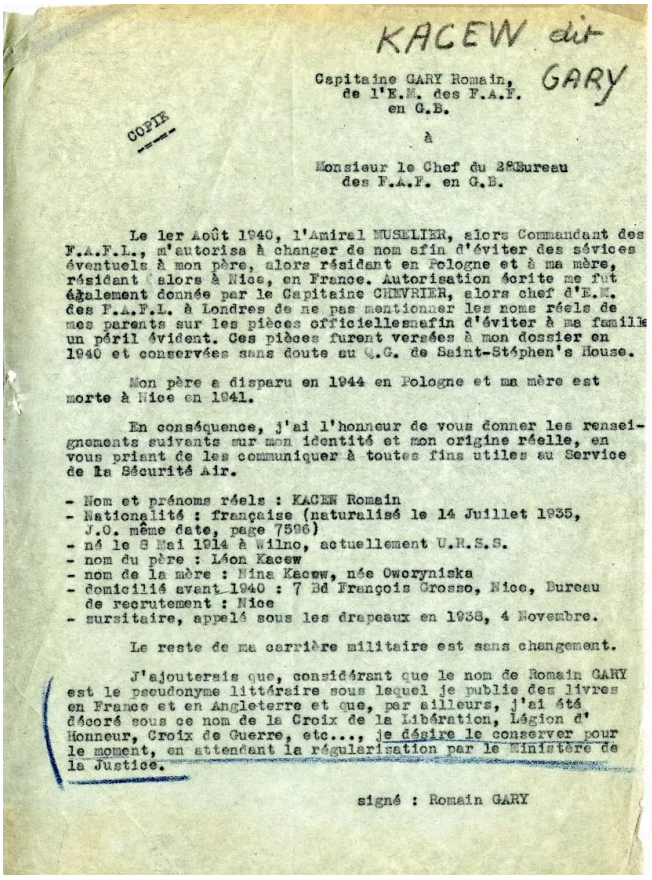
Gary knew English because he had spent the war years in the Free French squadron of the RAF. While stationed near London, he met and then married a British journalist, Lesley Blanch, who took it upon herself to educate this handsome Polish-Russian-French airman in the culture of England. He turned out to be a quick study. Gary's London attachment accounts very largely for how he handled the transatlantic career he had no idea he would have not so long after.



Christmas card by Lesley Blanch, Los Angeles 1957. © Estate of Lesley Blanch

Source: lesleyblanch.com

Gary's first novel, an episodic narrative of anti-German resistance in the forests of Wilno – which was what his hometown Vilnius was then called – was written in fits and starts in a bunk at an RAF barracks. When it was finished, it was submitted to editors at the journal *La France Libre*, a Gaullist periodical run at that time by Raymond Aron. Read and then recommended by the famous Soviet agent Moura Budberg, it was instantly accepted for publication in English translation by the Cresset Press. It appeared in the last days of 1944 under the title *Forest of Anger*. It did not appear in its French "original" until nine months later, but that "original" was already significantly different. *Forest of Anger* contains a great deal of Polish material, from songs to quotations to invocations of the national anthem. However, *Éducation européenne*, its supposed source text, contains no references to Polish language or culture; and it has added chapters that did not figure in the English pre-original. The reason for the changes was straightforwardly political. By summer 1945, Poland had been occupied by Soviet troops, and all hopes for the renaissance of a fully independent nation – the dream of the characters in *Forest of Anger*, and the reason for their military resistance to German occupation – had been dashed by Churchill's deal with Stalin. Polish soldiers and airmen, of whom there many thousands in the UK, were not allowed to join the great victory parade in June 1945.



KACEW dit GARY

Capitaine GARY Romain,
de l'E.M. des F.A.F.
en G.B.

COPIE

à

Monsieur le Chef du 2ème Bureau
des F.A.F. en G.B.

Le 1er Août 1940, l'Amiral MUSELIER, alors Commandant des F.A.F.L., m'autorisa à changer de nom afin d'éviter des sévices éventuels à mon père, alors résidant en Pologne et à ma mère, résidant alors à Nice, en France. Autorisation écrite me fut également donnée par le Capitaine CHEVRIER, alors chef d'E.M. des F.A.F.L. à Londres de ne pas mentionner les noms réels de mes parents sur les pièces officiellesmafin d'éviter à ma famille un péril évident. Ces pièces furent versées à mon dossier en 1940 et conservées sans doute au Q.G. de Saint-Stéphen's House.

Mon père a disparu en 1944 en Pologne et ma mère est morte à Nice en 1941.

En conséquence, j'ai l'honneur de vous donner les renseignements suivants sur mon identité et mon origine réelle, en vous priant de les communiquer à toutes fins utiles au Service de la Sécurité Air.

- Nom et prénoms réels : KACEW Romain
- Nationalité : française (naturalisé le 14 Juillet 1935, J.O. même date, page 7596)
- né le 8 Mai 1914 à Wilno, actuellement U.R.S.S.
- nom du père : Léon Kacew
- nom de la mère : Nina Kacew, née Owcryniska
- domicilié avant 1940 : 7 Bd François Grosso, Nice, Bureau de recrutement : Nice
- sursitaire, appelé sous les drapeaux en 1938, 4 Novembre.

Le reste de ma carrière militaire est sans changement.

J'ajouterais que, considérant que le nom de Romain GARY est le pseudonyme littéraire sous lequel je publie des livres en France et en Angleterre et que, par ailleurs, j'ai été décoré sous ce nom de la Croix de la Libération, Légion d'Honneur, Croix de Guerre, etc..., je désire le conserver pour le moment, en attendant la régularisation par le Ministère de la Justice.

signé : Romain GARY

In this letter, which was probably sent in the summer of 1945, Romain Gary requests that his pen name – under which he has been serving since 1940 – continue to be used by the French Air Force (F.A.F)

Source: Service historique de la Défense, Vincennes, File DE 2014 ZL 170/1188

Gary thus learned in a flash that he had to talk to a different audience in French, to give it his story in forms it could accept at a time when the prestige of the Red Army was at its peak. This brief and brutal introduction to geopolitics also made him into such an acerbic satirist that his second novel, Tulipe (1946), fell into a black hole, from which it has never emerged. His publisher, Calmann-Lévy, dropped him, but in 1948, he was approached by Gaston Gallimard, who agreed to sign him up for his next five works. The first to be completed was *Le Grand Vestiaire* (1948), a philosophical and social panorama of Paris in the immediate postwar period, told in the first person by a teenager who comes close to losing himself in a life of crime. The contract contained an unusual clause: all English-language rights in Gary's past and future work were reserved to the author. This special clause was probably inserted done to avoid having to repurchase the rights to Forest of Anger from its UK publisher; and yet the dream of the hero of *Le Grand Vestiaire*, to become an American, seems to reflect a budding idea in Gary's mind that he too might one day want to be free to pursue a career in English. Even so, Gary could surely not have foreseen how advantageous the "English exception" in his contract would come to be.

Le Grand Vestiaire did not do well in France. However, on learning that one of his wartime acquaintances in London had become an editor at Simon and Schuster, Gary contacted him and asked him if he would like to publish an English translation. Not only did Joe Barnes jump at the opportunity, he used it to launch a new series of cheap books called "Readers' Editions."

Under the title *The Company of Men*, Gary's novel appeared in New York in 1951, and it made the author famous. By happy coincidence, a couple of months later Gary was dragooned by his mentor in the diplomatic service, Henri Hoppenot, into taking on the role of spokesman for the French delegation at the Security Council of the United Nations, in New York. In that role, Gary appeared on network news on radio and TV to express the official French position on matters debated at the Security Council and the General Assembly; he was reckoned to be the best English-speaker in the entire team. Within a few months, his was probably the best-known French face in the USA apart from that of his personal hero, Charles de Gaulle. Gary's American career thus got off to a spectacular start. *The Company of Men* went into paperback very quickly and sold tens of thousands of copies. Although the royalties supplemented Gary's meager diplomatic salary in almost worthless postwar French francs, he remained very poorly housed in high-priced Manhattan, and wrote most of his next novel in lunchbreaks on the toilet seat.

When *Les Racines du ciel* won the Goncourt, there was no question but that it would appear in English in the USA and the UK in double-quick time. When it did, it was snapped up by Hollywood for a prince's ransom and turned into a technicolor blockbuster, starring Errol Flynn and Juliette Greco. It may not be a terribly good movie, but that's beside the point: *Roots of Heaven* turned Romain Gary – who was appointed in the midst of this to the coveted post of Consul-General in Los Angeles – into a transatlantic businessman.



Juliette Greco in John Huston's *The Roots of Heaven*, Darryl F. Zanuck Productions, United States, 1958. Trailer screenshot

It takes no great imagination to grasp why Gary turned at that point to a literary career in the US. However, he did not initially think that he needed to resign from the foreign service or seek US nationality. He could be a writer and a diplomat at the same time, like Paul Claudel, Saint-John Perse and so many others, including Poles, like Csezlaw Milosz. He would just do it in his sixth language.

However, the business of dealing with main and the subsidiary rights to different works in three different jurisdictions was more than Gary could manage, and the tax implications were hard to grasp. Switzerland beckoned. Gary therefore acquired a pied-à-terre in Geneva and set up a private company, Intelpro SA, to which he ascribed those of his copyrights worldwide that were not owned by Gallimard. It's not clear when

that neat solution to the problem lapsed, but by the 1970s Gary was begging Giscard d'Estaing to intervene on his behalf with the French tax office to let him off the hook. The president declined to do any such thing.

The next turn in the tale could not have been invented by a novelist. Gary fell in love with and soon set up home with Jean Seberg, the waif-like star of Preminger's *Joan of Arc* – and in 1960, her career suddenly took her to Paris. Her role in Godard's *A Bout de souffle* made her the emblematic face of the "New Wave." Gary followed in her footsteps, and acquired a lavish property in the heart of the Left Bank, at 107, rue du Bac. In addition, because he and Jean were not married (and because he himself was not yet divorced from Lesley Blanch), Gary felt obliged to leave the foreign service. One consequence of this turnabout was that he resumed his career as writer of French – but unbeknownst to his editors at Gallimard and the French literary establishment as a whole, he kept on writing novels in English as well.

For years, French readers had no idea that the author of *Les Racines du ciel* had also published *Lady L* (1959), *The Talent Scout* (1961) and *The Ski Bum* (1965), of which no French originals existed and no translations published. Only Gary's special clause in his contract with Gallimard made that possible, but it seems that for a time Gary was apprehensive of being found out.



Opening credits for *Lady L*, France-Italy, Compania Cinematografica Champion, 1965. Trailer screenshot

However, when a film was made of *Lady L.,* and when its producers planned to launch it in France, Gary felt it necessary – or advantageous – to bring out a French edition (1963). This first back-translation led to a regular drip-feed into French of Gary's English works, often substantially altered, and under titles that were not obvious equivalents. *The Ski Bum* for example, is *Adieu Gary Cooper* (1969) in French, and *The Talent Scout* became *Le Mangeur d'étoiles* (1966).

Gary never lived in America again, except for brief periods (including the summer of 1968), when Jean was there on location for a film shoot. After a decade of the grand life and a double but no longer hidden identity, he got fed up with being the famous Romain Gary with a celebrity lifestyle and heaps of money, an *immeuble* at 107, Rue du Bac and a palatial residence in Majorca, not to mention his flat in Geneva and a rural hide-away near Cahors. He wanted to be someone else, so as to be read for what he could write, not for what he had become. He went back to being a nobody, without telling anybody what he was doing.



Jean Seberg in *Police Magnum (Kill!)*, written and directed by Romain Gary, France-Germany-Italy– Spain, Barnabé Production, 1971. Screenshot

Gary's self-re-invention as Émile Ajar coincided with the end of his activity as an American novelist. This is not a coincidence. On the first page of *Gros-Câlin* (1974), an editorial title replacing the original *La Solitude du Python à Paris*, Gary-Ajar announces that he does not write French very well and asks the reader to forgive his "*mutilations, mal-emplois, sauts de carpe, entorses, refus d'obéissance, crabismes, strabismes et immigrations sauvages du langage, syntaxe et vocabulaire*." [7] The project, barely suspected by French readers of the day, was to write *neither in French nor in English*, but in a translingual dialect, comprehensible in French, but liberally sprinkled with tokens of all the other languages Gary knew. Words of Yiddish, Russian, Polish, German and English serve in addition as authentications of his authorship and ownership of a text ascribed to someone else. That intoxicating linguistic tour de force made the exploit of writing English whilst being a French writer redundant already.

To get away with this complicated imposture, Gary invented another transatlantic leap. The manuscript was dumped on the desk of Gary's publisher by a French businessman recently returned from Brazil, in an envelope addressed to him with a franked Brazilian postage stamp on it. This gave initial plausibility to the outer cover story: that the author, who was not really called Émile Ajar, was a fugitive from French justice accused of medical malpractice, or else a deserter from the army who had taken refuge in a country on the other side of the ocean with which France had no extradition treaty.

The rumor that Émile Ajar was the pseudonym of a Palestinian activist, Hamil Rajah, was a second cover put about almost certainly by agents working without their knowledge for Romain Gary. He was very adroit at exploiting the politically correct in order to laugh at it without being seen.

Simone Gallimard fell for it. She thought she had discovered a new literary star and published *Gros-Câlin* straight away. Unfortunately, because the contract was done with a fictional entity, Émile Ajar, through lawyers, with forged signatures, the translation rights now belonged to Gallimard. Because Émile Ajar was not Romain Gary (he *had* to be "not Romain Gary" in order for Gary to make his point), this novel was not covered by the clause in the real Gary's contract that left English-language rights to him.

When Gary's second Ajar novel, *La Vie devant soi* (1975), won the Goncourt prize, it was immediately bought for English translation by New Directions, who hired the veteran translator Ralph Manheim to do the job. Manheim did not get the joke, and believed he was dealing with a novice writer who needed some proper editing. Gary was therefore powerless in his Ajar disguise to intervene to re-adjust the English translation to something nearer the tone of the original. *La Vie devant soi* in its American version is not a very convincing book; as it was by an unknown writer who was not available for bookshop talks or media interviews, *Life Before Us* made little impact in the USA. The eclipse of the American Gary had begun. It was to become total.

Gary committed suicide in 1980, and shortly thereafter his own account of the Ajar hoax was published according to instructions laid out in his will. In France, the scandal only increased Gary's prominence and led people to re-read works previously published under the name Gary. However, in America, the revelation of inauthenticity, of cheating, and of a spot of lying to boot, killed Gary stone dead a second time over. The last Ajar novel appeared in the UK in 1981, with *Life and Death of Emile Ajar* appended to it. No US publisher dared pick it up, and no further Gary titles were released in the US for over 40 years. *Les Cerfs-volants* (1979), Gary's last novel under his own name and a coda to his entire work, came out as *The Kites* only in 2016. All Gary's works are available in paperback in French (and in Polish and German and most other languages too), but in English you would be hard put to find even a second-hand copy of anything other than *Promise at Dawn* (and since 2016, *The Roots of Heaven* in a new edition).

So here's the irony. A writer who chose to write in transatlantic mode to escape from the prejudices of the French establishment ended up being blackballed by America for having dared to be someone else. He was entirely successful in managing the wrinkles in the circulation of texts between Europe and the USA for thirty years, between the 1950s and the end of the 1970s; but those very wrinkles brought his American career to a virtual full stop whilst his posthumous position in French culture has not ceased to flourish and grow. That's the one joke that surely does not make Gary laugh in his grave.

All the same, Gary's story pokes one glaring hole in the idea that American and French literature are separate things; and it suggest rather strongly that professional readers in Paris and New York are not good at noticing traps designed to exploit their linguistic ignorance, their political subservience, or their sentimentality.

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