

An Interview with Bel-Ami Jean de Montreux

An email interview conducted by Alan Reiser in the autumn of 2012 with Bel-Ami Jean de Montreux, founder of Utah Foreign Language Review.

Motivations for founding UFLR

You began UFLR in 1991, while a student at the University of Utah. You were in law school at the time. Can you tell us a bit about your motivations for creating the journal? What unmet needs did you perceive that a journal of this sort would address?

I was in my last year of law school when I joined the Department of Foreign Languages in 1991. After three long years of legal graduate school and reading antique legal English, I needed to be in an environment to recapture my French that had become what is commonly called Franglais. So, I registered for a few French literature classes.

At the law school, I was an editor of the *Journal of Contemporary Law* and the *Journal of Energy Law and Policy*. Around that time, I was also the editorial columnist for the University's newspaper, *The Daily [Utah] Chronicle*. Thus, I was high on writing and publishing. One thing I had noticed in academia is that the prestigious universities traditionally publish journals of different nature. Often, each department of those institutions invests in and promotes this kind of scholarship. The idea then came to me that the Department of Foreign Languages [Now the Department of Languages and Literature] should entertain the idea of publishing a literary review, not just a couple of stapled sheets of papers, but a bound book of scholarly quality and capacity, featuring research, creative writings and other forms of works with social and cultural merit.

Perhaps this is where I should explain the difficult genesis of the Review. I approached the faculty, the department's head and the relevant organs at the university for some financial contribution, and quickly found that there were no takers. Apparently, if the project was to take off, I was on my own in finding the means to publish. Also, I had to get a staff to help out. A few students volunteered, namely Olga Todoric and Gloria T. Gilmore accepted a heavy load of

editorial assignments. Credit should also go to Professor Richard Berchan who gave us credibility in publishing a paper in the first issue.

With a barebones staff and no money, we managed to collect a few articles, added our own writings and made it to press. It is worth noticing here that various printers sued me several times in small claims courts for printing debts on behalf of the journal. For the years I published UFLR here, I did it with my own funds. I believed it was a good program. To see the journal still alive after 20 years and thriving and receiving the University's assistance make me feel it was a sound idea. I am proud to see that it is now a prestigious part of the school.

From the first issues back in 1991, 1992, the articles in UFLR seemed to address those topics that are often easily overlooked, and yet very close to the "big" issues of the day. That is the attention to the activity just off center stage, if you will. It seemed as though things going on in the wings always influenced the headliner issues, but little attention was given to them. It is as though the bright lights of academic inquiry had illuminated certain subjects, but at the same time had blinded our attention to the busy, often personal activity in the periphery.

In the beginning of the Review, the editorial dream was to promote an eclectic literary magazine. We would be an organ where students, professors and scholars would have a credible academic medium to disseminate their creative views, and even their socio-politico-creative studies so long as the writings were contextual, even if marginally. Graduating from the publishing societies of law school, I knew the value of publishing scholarly papers and the importance and prestige it carries in academic circles. Publishing sometimes can be the reason a student is admitted in a program or a professor gets tenure.

Would we have preferred only articles that are mainstream? I really do not think so because the unofficial motto was: "The door is open. Let's see what you have!" Our genre was successful for a new publication. Luckily the work submitted had class and, as you observe, addressed the big issues, migration, foreign treaties and other off-center topics.

Amazingly, those early issues have not gone stale over time. Today, they are the thesis of policy debates. That is nearly a quarter

century later. To some extent, and with pardonable pride, I would like to claim we had a vision whose focus is finally clear.

UFLR has always invited creative writing in various forms: poetry, creative essays and short prose, etc. We have an excellent example of prose in this issue with Mehran Mazinani's memoir as an academic in Tehran, and Jose Clemente Carreno Medina's poems. But you got the ball rolling with a number of your own poems. Why did you feel this was necessary in an otherwise scholarly discipline? Is there something in this mode of expression/writing that can't be handled in a typical scholarly essay?

Once thing that was odd to me in the American, if not the Utah, academic context was that poetry was always treated as the poorest parent in the big family of literary disciplines. The near total disregard for poetry as a worthy partner was not cool and not easily accepted by the prolific poet that I was. To my knowledge, other than a few stapled sheets that circulated on campus, the genre was ignored. It is true that teachers taught poetry as part of the curriculum, but honestly, students just were not given credit for their own poetic inspiration. A few national magazines organize contests, but those were restricted to English language poetry. So, I figured, if we invited submissions of poetry to the review, we could really be opening the door to quality writings that otherwise would go unknown.

Besides, I feel a scholarly literary review does not have to limit itself to just philosophical development of century old school of thoughts, the meaning of a particular color in the body of work of, let's say, Ernest Hemingway, the literary autopsy of a deceased writer or abstract subjects. We could discover the next Maya Angelou! And besides, we gain in interest and readership, but still maintain quality.

A good example that poetry can be handled in typical scholarly essay was that a German scholar used one of my own poems to write a comparative article treating the simple subject of an "adjective." Yes, an adjective!

Since Founding UFLR

The last 20 years have kept you busy as an immigration attorney and advocate for many causes. Can you tell us a bit about what you have done to help get marginalized groups recognition and dignity?

It has indeed been a very busy 20 years. In the literary field, I have worked with Haitian writers and poets, trying to publish anthologies of that country's very rich literary production. We published a compilation of Haitian poetry in the UFLR in 1994. I still collaborate with Doctor John Nelson, a famous Haitian poet, and others in several anthologies.

My legal practice has taken me many different ways. I have found myself defending against discrimination in employment, sexual harassment, civil rights and constitutional issues. I can say that to some extent, although in a different context, I have tried to stand as a shield for people in very fragile positions.

Your own articles in 1991 and 1992 addressed issues of inequality in the application of immigration law, especially as it applies to asylum seekers and refugees. Those are certainly perennial issues, and you've been an immigration attorney since then. What is your perspective of the immigrant climate today compared to twenty years ago, especially regarding refugees and asylum seekers?

As an immigrant and as an attorney, I have an advantageous view of the immigration situation. Immigration laws are archaic and their application can be cruel. It can be a painful experience witnessing a family being separated, citizen children from their illegal parents, young people who arrived in this country as infants....

Immigration laws are unnecessarily intricate and often result in conflicting reading and application. The case law interpreting immigration statutes is often pure legal witchery. Applying all this mess in a state as conservative as Utah makes immigration law a high stunt practice.

Not much has changed since 20 years ago. The 1996 Immigration Reform Act worsened the situation, making it even more difficult for the immigrant, and in effect, is very counter productive. Imagine if you are an American citizen and your brother is a Mexican citizen who lives in Mexico. If you petition immigration on his behalf to have him immigrate here, the wait is some 20 years. Facing this so-called legal immigration, the immigrant finds crossing the border illegally a better option. That is one of the ways illegal migration to this country is encouraged.

Another example, prior to the reform, it was relatively easy for the parent of a US citizen to gain legal residence if he or she was here

illegally, now, it is a mess and often impossible. Those are just a few examples.

As far as seeking asylum, it is a means of last resort. I personally do not advocate seeking that relief unless the alien is prima facie eligible.

Immigration reform is an urgent necessity. The issue cannot be ignored further and hopefully it will not be pushed aside now that the election is over.

Our theme this year is “Unmasking Effaced Identities.” I think we had hoped to look at how the portrayals of various groups of people are quite often very different from how they see themselves. You’ll see this in many of the articles in this issue. From your perspective as a career immigration attorney, could you share any insights into how this portrayal affects the individuals themselves? I mean, from either side of that question, either how they are misread and ‘effaced’ as individuals, or how they respond, react or even work with these mis-characterizations?

Few things are as controversial as immigration and the safe political strategy appears to be “don’t touch this.”

Since the economic situation in this country keeps worsening, in many quarters of society, immigrants are seen as one of the main reasons the country is in the economic quagmire that it is. Some say that but for the immigrants taking jobs at low wages, they would be employed. Never mind that we spent trillions fighting wars and stimulating our collapsing financial institutions, including the real estate nightmare of the past six or seven years.

In truth, without the immigrants, our situation would be much worse. Imagine a full week, a day even, without the illegal immigrant workforce in our society. Restaurants would shut down. Hotels would go out of business. The agriculture industry would be paralyzed. Not to mention a big fiscal hit to the nation that takes a hefty share of tax dollars from the paychecks of illegal aliens. Hey! Even the IRS issues a taxpayer social security number to illegal immigrants. It is called a tax ID. Now how’s that for a legal conflict.

Immigration is certainly motivated by politics and economics. But it is the cultural component that is often the most obvious to those on both sides. Those immigrating and those residing in a given place encounter

unfamiliar cultural practices in the other that often cause misunderstandings, exoticization, or even conflict. Can you share any insights or examples about how people cope with these cultural encounters?

There is no equivocation that immigration is motivated by politics, and so much more than by economics. If you mean that immigration influences economics positively, then I can agree. This is evidenced by how important the immigrant workforce is to the agricultural and the service industries. Let's not forget that we need to keep welcoming scientists and intellectuals from other countries to stay relevant in a very competitive world where America's industrial hegemony is challenged by emerging economies such as Brazil and China. Those countries also are actively recruiting talent. They have the American success model to guide them. They know that cannot do it alone. What is interesting is that nowadays, Americans are emigrating to those countries in search of opportunities.

If it were just the political and economic factors that affected immigration, it would be resolved already and each side in the political spectrum would be claiming credit. The last presidential election is by far the best example. However, immigration seems to be dictated more by prejudice than by cultural mores. Actually, most immigrants acquire something called cultural assimilation after living here for a while. While many keep practicing their former countries' heritage, and they should, by the second or third generation, they are fully Americanized.

Our country has always been able to blend in the different cultures that bless us and we are always able to weave them into our very rich tapestry. Sadly, however, racism is deeply rooted in our society. That, plus economic hardships, can trigger insensitivity and even hatred in parts of our society. It is amazing that most people forget they descend from immigrants themselves.

**Challenges for the next decade as the world faces
even more intense cultural engagement.**

It seems that the focus in the US twenty years ago was on the Caribbean and Latin America, and now these other issues are mixing that message quite a bit. Today, after a decade of US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, with its unrest throughout North Africa and the Arab world, deadly civil wars in Libya and Syria, huge changes in Egypt and

quickly rising Chinese influence throughout the globe, and there is a dizzying diversity within the United States.

The world has known very few great empires. I consider the Ancient Greek Empire that lasted from 8th Century BC to around 600 AD and the Roman Empire that took hold from 272 BC to around 1453 AD (don't hold me to those dates), and then the British, to be the three predecessor empires to the United States. Along the way, the French, the Aryans, and even antique Russia have tried their hands at empire building but to little success. I think, and many historians would agree, that America is the first and only true modern area empire.

Empires acquire their status by their economic prowess and their martial conquests. America has gained Empire status basically from its foundation thanks to the power of its Constitution that had the amazing foresight to create a society of law and order. To ascertain its economic might, America became the world policeman, making friends and alienating some nations. It was World War II and Hitler, however that truly took us beyond this Hemisphere. The Cold War era did a lot to add to our mysticism.

Our global reach has taken us from overtly and covertly colonizing Caribbean and Latin American countries by dictating and/or installing their governments, when not invading them, to the other side of the globe. Vietnam, the Koreas come to mind. That we found ourselves intertwined with the destiny of Middle Eastern countries is just a natural consequence of empire building. We need oil to fuel the empire!

But the world has changed. It seems the DNA of the Jeffersons, the Madisons, and the Lincolns appear to have been spent. Few of our current leaders are selfless like the founders. The average politicians think of himself and his wealth and not about his political heritage. Thus, we enter into conflicts without assessing the risks and benefits. We take positions blindly and in due course, we create bitter enemies that target our civilization and aim to destroy it. The rise of terrorism, Al-Qaeda and its murderous ethos result from some of our miscalculated policies. To some great extent, must we accept responsibility for some of the change in the Middle East. Yes. We uprooted a dictator in Iraq, though at an enormous costs in human sacrifice and resources. Did that spur the Libyans, the Tunisians, and the Egyptians? There is a strong inference that is the case. The fear,

however, is that radical elements are being democratically elected in those societies at a cost to the American Empire.

The recent election, as you mentioned earlier, demonstrated the growing Latino population and influence of various minority groups in the US. Both domestic and international cultural diversity played a much larger role in this last election than perhaps in any other. I mean, the focus now is less on a 1-1 cultural exchange, the United States vs its Southern neighbors, but more n-n, where even the United States' own cultural identity is less cohesive than it was twenty years ago. Now we are engaged in a multi-way cultural exchange within and without. Do you have any thoughts regarding this direction? What opportunities or challenges might the individual have when trying to map their own way in this diverse cultural landscape? What anxieties are people confronting? Are they different now than they once were?

Ahhh! The lessons of the last presidential election! Some 20 years ago, an establishment candidate like Mitt Romney would have won the presidency by a landslide. How the times have changed! We are now a plural society without a true dominant ethnic or gender group as in the past.

The political spectrum has been changing since emancipation. The woman vote, and the Civil Rights movement were important dates along the way. Now, the change seems to have reached its apex because of the influences of immigration in the political arena. The new citizens and their children, be they Caucasians, brown, yellow or black, are fully aware of the political power they collectively yield. Candidates pandering to Bible-Belt fanatics and to ultra conservative groups are not going to be successful in national elections. They will even fail in some local state elections. Fueling racial division and fear just do not work in politics anymore. The modern candidate must appeal to all groups.

There are of always challenges in just about anything that is important, but a lot of opportunities are to be reaped from this mosaic. We are rich in our diversity. Academia, industry and just about every aspect of American society gain from our uniqueness. People should set aside their fear of what appears different on the outside but breaths just the same. It is a good day when we do not judge by shades but by character.

Do you think these multi-cultural societies (like where the US is headed) foster greater acceptance, or perhaps, does it make it easier to “not see” immigrants as individuals, but to view them more as categories, overlooking them? Or, put another way, could cultural diversity today be much like data on the internet, where the signal-to-noise ratio gets so low that we lose the ability to meaningfully engage, but just ‘culture surf’ people as tropes, rather than individuals? Almost as though the variety of people we see in the real world are just another YouTube channel that we surf for our own consumption, and then surf on to another entertainment?

The immigrant is relevant. He is here to stay and, to our credit, we have done and continue to do a lot to ease his assimilation. In some states for example, you can take a driver’s license examination in a multitude of languages, including Arabic and Vietnamese. The beauty of Americanism is its ability to mesh people of different backgrounds, religions and languages into one people, a *WE the people*. Hence my fascination with the American Constitution that seems to have foreseen future centuries and bestowed rights to groups yet unimaginable at the time of drafting.

When it comes Americana, we do not have to surf from cultures. We just take it in and enjoy the colors, the literatures that they bring in and that become our literature, our music and our dances. If the Greek, the Italians, the Jews have so become engrained in our culture, why wouldn’t the Vietnamese or the Arabs or the Russians!

What is amazing, however, in other countries that do not possess the same legal culture, immigrants are hated, vilified, tormented, brutalized and cursed. That is true of Russia that offers little, if any protection, to Africans and any dark skinned person of any nationality. That is a fact in practically the entire old Eastern bloc of Europe. The venom of blatant racism infests Germany. Even in France, the saying *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité* has lost its appeal.

More on cultural technology: Facebook, Twitter, and the like have been at the heart of a lot of cultural change and exchange. Egypt’s own revolution was facilitated early on by Facebook, and Twitter has given a peek inside the changes occurring throughout the Arab world. It seems that the increased cultural contact is stretching our ability to navigate our cultural topography. Do you have any perspective on this? Is our individual ability to meaningfully engage at a limit? Can we keep

expanding our cultural horizons, or will there be some retraction that inevitably occurs? How do you see cultural technology affecting people in the contact zone? Does it motivate people to seek change (through immigration) more? Does it make it easier for host cultures to take in others, or does it create new virtual borders that exclude?

Can you imagine if we had Facebook, Twitter, Google, and satellite, cell phones and like technology in the 1930s and 1940s? The Holocaust would not have happened! Nowadays, thanks to the advent of those forms of communication, news is shared in real time, tyrants are exposed and people are freed.

Technology such as Facebook makes our big world a lot smaller and brings people together. I have a Facebook friend in Cameroon I have never met in person. It is amazing that his vision for his country mirrors our American principles. If the technology is used in positive manners, as it should always, then it will close cultural gaps, stimulate the spirit and broaden horizons. Far from creating virtual borders, technology unifies people and celebrates diversities.

Twenty years ago, our department was primarily focused on Post-Colonial topics in the Caribbean and Latin America, Francophone Africa, as well as heritage topics in Europe. We taught mostly Spanish French and German, as well as Classics. Now we see a lot of Chinese and Arabic students, and many other cultures and literatures are represented. Tell me a bit about your own views of university education, academia, in relation to these issues? Is academia adapting adequately, are we responding to the changes in our society appropriately, or are we somehow a part of the problem?

I have been away from academia for almost 20 years. I do not know if I am the best to comment this query, but I would hope that the Department is able to adapt academically to a vastly changing world. UFLR has a role to play in this. We were publishing in Russian when nobody else was interested. We published German and Spanish articles. We already had a vision of the importance of each language of expression in our academic circles.

Just as the Ivy League schools, to be competitive and attract the brightest students and the best instructors, the Department can and must respond to the needs of the scholar whatever his or her roots and needs.