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Culture in Transit

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Translating
the Literature
of Quebec



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Introduction

Sherry Simon

SOME YEARS AGO, I witnessed a remarkable dramatization of the cultural relations involved in translation. Antonine Maillet, the Acadian writer, and Philip Stratford, her translator, performed a reading of the courtroom scene in Maillet's *Crache-à-pic*—she declaiming the part of the volatile Acadian defendant in French, he playing the dour and phlegmatic judge in English. Both being more than accomplished hams, the performance was sensational. But the impact of the event went beyond the excitement of a good show: its power had to do with the way it acted out the passions and tensions of translation.

No two figures could have been more dissimilar. Standing in the dock was the small, fiery Acadian writer; behind the bench, the lanky translator-judge. The more passionately she clamoured, the slower and duller he became. Obviously both were having great fun exaggerating the stereotypes of the French and English-Canadian, using the text to play up legendary traits of “national” character. But this was not the only set of long-standing stereotypes their dialogue brought out. They were also performing the roles of writer and translator—she the initiator, he the admiring and dutiful respondent. Playfully invoking the most weighty issues of cultural difference—they were, after all, in a courtroom where the judge would have the final word—the skit set out the terms that frame Canadian translation. It showed how cultural exchange is nourished by

individual desires and infatuations, just as it feeds on the tensions of historical relationships.

While the two central partners in Canada's literary exchange have changed a great deal over the last century, it is possible to say that *cultural attraction* remains one of the most potent motives for translation. Many translators of Quebec literature began their work of mediation as journalists or writers, and fell into translation as a means of communicating their enthusiasm for the difference of Quebec. Translators know, of course, that this "difference" is by no means a fixed reality, but rather a phantom they are constantly forced to re-shape, a role which they could interpret in various ways. The tremendous literary diversity of both territories, the importance of social movements like feminism, the fragmentation of genre, make it impossible to confine translation to a single framework of inter-cultural mediation.

The essays in this volume explore the complexity of the many new literary relationships enacted by translation. They emerge out of the rich and remarkably self-conscious tradition of translation from French into English,¹ and in particular the translation of Quebec literature for English Canada. Unlike most literary translation which is *inter-national*, Canadian translation has historically been an *intra-national* affair. As a result, translators have been highly aware of the public they were writing for, addressing their work to a precise collective destination, English or French Canada. The privilege of translation in Canada has been the possibility of participating in—and, perhaps even, influencing—exchanges between these cultural groups.

The contributors are some of Canada's most prominent translators, a group which has made whole libraries of Quebec literature available to English-speaking readers. Their involvement in literature in almost all cases extends beyond translation, including activities as creative writers, journalists, critics, teachers and literary agents. Only one translator, William Findlay, does not live and work in Canada. He is the translator, with Martin Bowman, of Michel Tremblay's plays into Scots. The remarkable success of Tremblay on the Scottish stage, as well as the power of the Glaswegian idiom to echo the accents of Montreal *joual*, have provided an unexpected twist in the story of the transmission of Quebec theatre. The transplantation of

Tremblay serves us some crucial lessons about the way supposedly local cultural products can inhabit the wide world.

The focus of this volume is cultural: it addresses the “why’s” more than the “how’s” of literary translation. This is not to say that the writerly questions of translation are not taken into consideration. But they are included insofar as they bring clarity to the issues which are at the origin of this book: how does the dialogue between communities (political, linguistic, cultural, literary) influence the dynamics of translation? How does the translator’s sensibility leave its mark in the translated text?

Each of the essays takes on these questions from a slightly different perspective. But, collectively, the contributions make a strong point. They show how translators’ active engagement with their texts, their emotional and intellectual commitment, is decisive for the success of the final product.

Identities to translate

The first section of the book emphasizes the role of the translator as an active agent in the process of cultural transmission. The work of translation is *oriented*; the translator’s mandate is grounded in a commitment to both the author and the social movements which give energy to his or her work.

Are we to be surprised that these emotional and ideological investments take on changing forms as the decades progress? Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood’s translation of Lucien Francoeur’s poetry in 1981 is a blast of enthusiasm for Quebec’s emergent rock culture; her preface sings the macho vitality of the new Quebec. Some ten years later, her commitment to feminism has led her to a new set of literary and cultural affiliations, and to a new ethic of translation. The symmetry of these two sites of engagement is striking, and it is probably true that feminism to some extent usurped the power of cultural nationalism as the prime motivator of literary commerce within Canada. The pieces by Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood, Luise von Flotow and Barbara Godard all show how feminist consciousness has been an active ferment of translation activity in Canada during the 1980s. It was the gutsy and irreverent erotic writing of Anne Dandurand which attracted Luise von Flotow, and brought her to

take on the work a number of other women authors who had been previously unknown outside of Quebec. It was the collective enthusiasm of the feminist play *La Nef des Sorcières* which enticed Linda Gaboriau into a career of theatre translation. Barbara Godard's journal entries draw a different sort of map. They pinpoint the intellectual sources of Nicole Brossard's writing, all the while charting the many levels at which the translator links into the emotions, rhythms and ideas of the text. Limited and narrow, the translator's task? Hardly.

In addition to feminism, an important change in the cultural self-perception in Quebec has been the transition from the image of an ethnically unified community to a more diverse and pluralistic society. This change too will affect the translator's task. David Homel's relationship with Dany Laferrière, a best-selling author and familiar media figure in Quebec, is yet another example of a fruitful association between writers of similar sensibilities and convictions. Homel is perfectly at ease in Laferrière's politico-erotic world, re-transplanting his already exiled words into new linguistic soil.

Cultural knowledge

How do you say *câlisse*, *tchesteurfilde*, *feluette*, or *Cuirette* in English? The second section of the book addresses that most persistent and intriguing problem of translation: how to find—or create—equivalent idioms for local, non-standard languages. Translators of Quebec fiction often find themselves faced with texts written in a language which is not standard French, but rather an imaginative recreation of oral speech or another kind of linguistic variant. The work of Michel Tremblay, Antonine Maillet (the Acadian writer whose work, following tradition, we will consider as an "extension" of Quebec literature) and Jacques Ferron have posed particularly vexing problems for their translators.

It remains a cause of some amazement to me that translators have yet to be recognized as remarkable sources of cultural knowledge. The solutions to many of the translator's dilemmas are not to be found in dictionaries, but rather in an understanding of the way language is tied to *local* realities, to literary forms, and to changing identities. Translators must constantly make decisions about the cultural

meanings which language carries, and evaluate the degree to which the the two different worlds they inhabit are “the same.” These are not technical difficulties; they are not the domain of specialists in obscure or quaint vocabularies. They demand the exercise of a wide range of intelligences.

Philip Stratford’s reflections on his translation of *Pélagie-la-Charette* by Antonine Maillet, the Goncourt-prize winning author whose books come accompanied by glossaries for French-language readers, illustrates some of the complexities of the question. Faced with a literary idiom which is neither French, nor Acadian, but something he can only call “Mailletois,” Stratford humbly declares that the only appropriate language into which it can be rendered is “Stratfordese.” Like “Mailletois,” “Stratfordese” is an imaginative re-creation, tapping a variety of cultural resources as rich as Antonine Maillet’s. Stratford shows how the borders of the truly “untranslatable” seem to recede when there is the desire to engage with the complexity of a rich linguistic universe, and recreate its inventiveness.

Ray Ellenwood and Betty Bednarski ask questions similar to Stratford’s when they approach the work of Jacques Ferron: what is the meaning and nature of the language Ferron uses? Ferron’s fiction is notorious for its straddling of borders: it mixes history and fiction, “high” literary language and “low” spoken vernacular, and envelops English sounds in strange-looking strings of French syllables, like *cuiquelounche* (quick lunch) and *farouest* (Far West). How is the translator to find an equivalent for such mixtures? The idea that there can be a single and triumphant answer to every translation dilemma is one of the illusions which the seasoned translator must abandon. But both translators use their cultural knowledge to set out broad ethical principles for their work.

How do you say joul in Scots?

That the question of equivalence involves political considerations is given strong emphasis in Kathy Mezei’s overview of the translation of English words in *joul*. What can be the English equivalent for an English word which inhabits a French text? During the 1960s and 1970s, Quebec writers frequently transgressed the borders of linguistic propriety in order to deliver a message: they wished to emphasize

the cultural alienation of Quebec, the too-strong presence of English within its cultural precincts. The message was an important part of a growing desire for cultural autonomy, and a sign of a period of literary emergence. Translators found themselves faced with a contradictory task. How to render the meaning of words already in English? How to transfer the sense created by the friction of two linguistic codes, when only one could be used meaningfully in the final product? Kathy Mezei highlights what seems to be an irreconcilable antagonism between the translator's desire and the norms of the publishing industry.

No author has come to represent the *joual* era more forcefully than Michel Tremblay. His play *Les Belles-sœurs* launched the linguistico-ideological battle of *joual* on the stages of Quebec in the late 1960s. That the echos of this debate have far outlived their ideological usefulness is now a truism. On the other hand, the communal, inward-turned language of Quebec theatre remains a challenge to translators who wish to transport this work, and its sometimes contradictory messages, to foreign stages.

What more appropriate gesture than to translate Tremblay's idiom into one traversed by the same contradictions? This is the venture described by William Findlay, a Scot, who along with the Canadian Martin Bowman, have successfully turned Tremblay into a Scots playwright. (*Les Belles-sœurs* has also been presented in Yiddish.) Now that five of Tremblay's plays have been successfully staged, and the texts of other Quebec playwrights also turned into Scots, this work has gone beyond the stage of a clever experiment. It is now clearly proved that the transmission of literature from and into minor idioms can be a stimulant for contemporary creation.

Some models from the past

The political tensions of the 1960s and 1970s gave particular prominence to literary translation from French into English. Philip Stratford, referring to the avidity of English-speaking readers for knowledge of Quebec culture during the tense and polarized 1970s, called translated novels "news from the front." However, the dilemmas of cultural transfer have occupied Canadian translators for more

than a century, and it would be appropriate to provide some historical context.

If Canadian literary translation were to have a Pantheon of heroes, William Hume Blake (1861-1924), translator of Louis Hémon's *Maria Chapdelaine*, would be an obvious candidate. His version of the novel (published in 1921) is surely of the most writerly and inspired of Canadian translations, one of those translations we might consider a classic in and of itself, rather than merely as a reproduction of the original. It is a translation which has some strange features, however, words left in French (*Chien* for the name of a dog), unfamiliar Gallicisms, and some rather awkward bits of dialogue. These features were intentional on the part of Blake, who clearly sought to have his English-speaking readers appreciate the specific features of Quebec French.

Blake's translation is in fact an extension of his elegant (and conservative) propagandizing in favour of the nobility and archaic virtues of French Canada. Blake's turns of phrases, his use of greetings and names, evoke a world in which people speak to one another with respectful distance. The archaic modes ("she saw them not"), unfamiliar or invented words with French resonance ("moveless, incult, essayed), and bizarre dialogue ("Well Mr. Larouche, do things go pretty well across the water?")—all these devices colour the text, reminding readers that the reality they are observing is unfamiliar and distant. Blake's translation, elegant as it is, is an expression of his conservative vision of French Canada and his attempt to celebrate an idealized, fictional culture.

Though only some twenty years prior to Blake's translation, Charles G.D. Roberts' English version of *Canadians of Old* proceeds from entirely different premises. The 1898 translation by Roberts has become a respected classic of "the Canadian literatures," a work which in some ways launched the two political and literary traditions on their parallel paths. There seems to be a paradox in Roberts' stated desire to promote French Canadian literature and the fact that his translation rides rough-shod over de Gaspé's novel. As Jane Brierley shows, Roberts' concern was exclusively for readability. He omitted details, constantly anglicized cultural references, and left out a sizeable chunk of the text (the notes). How are we to interpret this

discrepancy? It would seem that Roberts' efforts were directed at one aim only—to successfully market de Gaspé's work. In this endeavour he was entirely successful. Jane Brierley's comments on her retranslation of Philippe Aubert de Gaspé's *Canadians of Old* are revealing of the changes in reading which come with the passage of generations.

Blake's and Roberts' work stand at opposite poles of the translation spectrum. Both used their work to promote French Canada and its literature—but their strategies reflect differing ideas about linguistic and cultural difference. Blake accentuated these differences, while Roberts attempted to eliminate them. Which solution have subsequent translators preferred? There has been as yet no definitive answer to this question. But the very proximity of the partners in this translation process suggests heightened sensitivity to cultural difference and points to Blake as the inspiration for Canadian translators. Ray Ellenwood's discussion of translating Ferron certainly points emphatically in this direction.

Given the variety of Quebec literature today, it would be impossible to reduce translation practice to the narrow framework of one single strategy. The difference of Quebec has splintered into many esthetic and social styles. Quebec literature in English includes a familiar body of classics (Jacques Ferron, Michel Tremblay, Anne Hébert, Gabrielle Roy, Roch Carrier, Jacques Poulin, Hubert Aquin, Victor-Lévy Beaulieu) to which new writers are continually being added (Dany Laferrière, Anne Dandurand, France Théoret, Nicole Brossard, Daniel Sernine, Esther Rochon, Daniel Poliquin, Marco Micone).

The face and shape of Quebec literature has changed; literary relations and practices in Canada have evolved. Both Wayne Grady, in the piece which opens this book, and Sheila Fischman, in the concluding interview, suggest that it may be time to revise the institutional framing of Canadian translation, and, among other changes, take into account third languages. The "inter-Canadian" dimension of literary commerce in Canada has given translators a remarkably clear focus for their work, and provided—as this collection shows—an exceptionally rich body of reflection on the cultural dimensions of the translation process. But this focus has also channelled atten-

tion away from the international role of Canadian translation, preventing full appreciation of existing and potential translation into French or English from other languages. And perhaps limiting consideration for the purely creative scope of translation. These areas of literary transmission have to be recognized and strengthened.

What do the in-between worlds of translators look like? Translators have been imagined to inhabit the cold, impersonal spaces of international travel, the hotel rooms and airports evoked in recent fictional depictions of translators, like the devious cosmopolitan polyglot drawn by Italo Calvino in *If On a Winter's Night a Traveller*, or the hopelessly divided and errant interpreter in Christine Brooke-Rose's collage-novel *Between*. The translators represented in this anthology operate within more restricted territories, mediate across more modest distances. Their essays evoke a warmer, more grounded interstitial world.

A long tradition of intercultural commerce in Canada has made the space of translation familiar. This does not mean that its contours are not changing. The collective social and literary identities on both sides of the cultural divide are in flux, each community discovering its own internal lines of fracture and its own plurality of voices. It can be safely predicted that translation in Canada will reflect this increasing complexity, the routes of linguistic traffic becoming broader and more numerous, the objects of literary trade more diverse. In taking on new forms, and occupying greater stretches of territory, translation will be responding to a renewed cultural mandate—a mandate whose terms have yet to be written.

Note

1. Translation from English into French will not be considered here, for reasons of space, but also because the story of translation "in the other direction" is different from the one told here. The double flow of translations has not been symmetrical, either in terms of the quantity and type of works chosen for translation or in terms of critical reception. Historically, Quebec publishers have invested in translating non-fiction rather than fiction. However, interest in translated fiction has increased considerably over the last few years.

Translating Identities