MAPPING LITERATURE

THE ART AND POLITICS OF TRANSLATION

EDITED BY

DAVID HOMEL AND SHERRY SIMON

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Translation's dual orientation — translation as the practice of reading and writing; translation as a vehicle through which cultures travel — informs this book from start to finish. This book features essays from writers and translators — and individuals who play both roles at once — from around the world. We hear from countries such as Finland, Hungary, and China, and not just from the 'imperial' literary powers. In *Mapping Literature* the writers talk of theatre and poetry, dialect and dialogue, sexual differences and language, the harsh business of remuneration, the complexities of literary identity in Quebec, and how foreign translators view Canadian literature.

David Homel is a Montreal writer and translator. He has translated works by many Quebec authors, including Réjean Ducharme, Dany Laferrière, Jacques Renaud, and by the French poet Robert Marteau. His novel *Electrical Storms* will be published by Random House.

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EDITORS' NOTE

This book began as an international conference entitled "Literary Translation and Literary Identity," created and sponsored by the Literary Translators' Association of Canada. When the event was over, before its accents and echoes could fade entirely, two of its main organizers decided to make what had been a stimulating three days into a book. Most of the proceedings were on tape. Occasional missing sections were solicited from participants. Unsuitable papers were dropped, and others were edited to fit the demands of the printed page. The discussions, however, are faithfully reproduced. The result: more than the proceedings of a colloquium, we have produced a collection of essays on the subject of literary translation.

This event, international in scope, was organized by theme, and not by country of origin. Hence, a man who works for Ubu Repertory Theater in New York speaks next to a stage translator from Belgrade; poets from Toronto and Budapest give their ideas on the same panel. The themes themselves belong as much to the participants as to the organizers of the event.

An event of this international scope could not have taken place without the cooperation of a variety of governmental agencies. The Department of External Affairs, the Department of Communications, the Canada Council, the Secretary of State, and the Ministère des Affaires culturelles du Québec are all to be thanked for their help. As well, the American Literary Translators' Association, by planning its meeting with us, added further scope to the event. From China, from Eastern and Western Europe, from Scandinavia, from across North America, these essays both map and make literature.

INTRODUCTION

Is I is or is I ain't, goddamn!
Ain't sure who I is nor where I am
Or I'm gonna be or I'm not gonna be
Or even a graver fate'll best me.

So runs "The Stageplay of *Hamlet* in the Village of Lower Jerkwater," or the attempts of a gang of Balkanized Yugoslavian workers to get themselves some "koolchur." Slobodan Drenovac's high parody of *Hamlet* done in Serbo-Croatian, then translated back into a brand of pig-English for our benefit, is just one of the curiosities and delights sampled in this collection of essays on the art and politics of literary translation. This book features essays from writers and translators—and individuals who play both roles at once—from around the world. We hear from countries such as Finland, Hungary, and China, and not just from the "imperial" literary powers we encounter at most international colloquia. In these pages, the writers talk of theatre and poetry, dialect and dialogue, sexual differences and language, the harsh business of cold cash, and the adventures of Canadian and *québécois* writing overseas. Their points of view are almost always new to us. Together, they give proof of why literary translation has become privileged ground for studying both the practice of reading and writing and the reception of literary texts between cultures.

Translation's dual orientation—translation as the practice of reading and writing; translation as a vehicle through which cultures travel—informs this book from start to finish. These same themes inspired the organization of the conference that provided a platform for the essays in this collection. To a considerable degree, the participants' contributions formed the conference, and hence the book, in an organic fashion; the conference soon became what its participants wanted it to be, as they expressed their wishes by slow boat and telegram in the months preceding the event.

It is no exaggeration to say that translation has become very much "in" among a variety of schools of literary criticism. The deconstructionists and their offshoots seize upon it as a model for transformation and doubling and various sorts of language play; the passage from one idiom to the next can engender the building and unbuilding of meanings central to this school of extreme relativism. Translation is also of interest to linguistic-based criticism, for very obvious reasons. Historians of psychoanalysis have begun to study what is lost and what is found in the process of translation/interpretation of Freud's texts. The writers in this book are aware of these many trends. But with a few exceptions, such as the discussion of feminist poetics and translation, our essayists more often than not present practical laboratories of language and cultural confrontation. We read of the censorship difficulties of staging Quebec theatre in China; the advantages and disadvantages of workshopping a translated play; the dialectics of author consultation when working on poetry; and the phenomenon of translating from a language one does not know.

"Translation is the self-realization of a culture"—this maxim bears repeating in the context of this book, a good part of which is devoted to the two national literatures within Canada and how they have travelled both within the country and around the world in a variety of translations. Here is a "How others see us" of the most concrete sort. Canadian writing has become an object of study throughout all parts of Europe, and, helped by occasional Canadian government support, has turned into something of a growth industry for overseas translators. There was a kind of magical moment during the last plenary session at the conference, when a large group of translators from all around the world crowded around the same long table to describe their work on Canadian writing in their home countries. When it was over, the home audience was tempted to remark, "So far, yet so near": the concerns of these "foreign" translators had some surprising similarities with those of their Canadian colleagues. Of course, history has been kinder to us than to translators from Asia or the Eastern Bloc countries. Works flow more freely into Canada, dictionaries and other sources are readily available, and censorship in any of its forms is almost non-existent compared to other places in the world. Yet beyond these topical differences lie the same creative abrasion between translator and author—even from a distance—and the same need for new voices, the same paradox of the necessity to translate and the impossibility of doing so fully.

Of the many things translators from other countries have to teach their Canadian colleagues, one lesson is how privileged the latter are. Literary translation is a veritable institution in this country—

it is a necessary part of the nation's self-image, and has been and probably will continue to be a part of the budgets of federal cultural agencies. Little wonder that Canadian translators have become especially aware of their social and political role. Of course, never far from such considerations is the Quebec-Canada issue. The "Contracts and Copyright" section is an apt example of these essayists' versatility, and their ability to turn from meditations on abrasion and affinities between writers and languages to residuals and translated films and talking books. This section displays the translator's role as informal literary agent and, more importantly, arbitrator of taste between cultures.

A word should be added on the composition of the book itself. The three major sections reflect what we believe to be the three areas of activity of translation: the making of literature, the political role, and the creation of national identities. And in the best Canadian tradition, this collection is more mosaic than melting-pot. Any given section may feature authors from Finland, Yugoslavia, Belgium, or the United States. Approaches will differ. Some are more academic, others off-the-cuff. Improvisations follow seemingly well-rehearsed speeches. Except for reasons of readibility, we have not sought to homogenize styles; this would be contrary to the book's very subject. These authors and their different styles corresponding to (or contradicting) their age and cultural background sat at the same table and were confronted in the same free discussions. This approach shows the "seams," the mortar between the pieces of the mosaic, the transition from an event to the written page. We believe it is the proper approach to a subject that is attracting growing attention from readers and critics of all kinds.

David Homel & Sherry Simon

PART ONE

TRANSLATION AS THE MAKING OF LITERATURE

THE WRITER AS TRANSLATOR/ THE TRANSLATOR AS WRITER

The experience of translation has so often been described through images of rivalry and resistance that we often forget to talk about the focus of attraction that begins the process. It is, in fact, the play between affinity and resistance that makes writers' accounts of why and how they translate so interesting. We want to find out how their love for other writing and other languages becomes expressed in terms of their own imaginative world—or, on the other hand, how the works they admire remain essentially outside the margins of their own work. The five writers who address these questions in this section couch their answers in very different terms. But, as the spirited discussion which greeted these presentations shows, by examining this issue we begin to face the most basic foundations of literature itself.

In describing why and how his translations came to be, Barry Callaghan is explicit about the emotional affinities which prompted them. Callaghan's translations were born of chance encounters, but they became gestures of friendship. He has translated French, Serbian, and Latvian poets. What is particularly interesting (and controversial) about these translations is that, as Callaghan explains, they are, in several cases, from languages he does not know well, or even at all. And yet, poetry is the result.

Translation as Callaghan explains it—in almost mystical terms—becomes a fascinating form of homage. Writing out of affection and generosity, the translator creates a new space in his or her own work. The translated work in a sense belongs to neither poet; it occupies a middle ground between the two. Because the translator's work is prompted by affection and admiration, the result is not a reproduction of his or her own codes and values, but something new.

Joyce Marshall develops the idea of maintaining distance, of creating a new space. In becoming intensely engaged with someone else's work, she can as a translator leave her own voice behind and assume another. She compares this distancing, very evocatively, with the writing of dialogue in the novel. Translation is a means of estrangement from self, of taking leave of a too-familiar language.

If Callaghan's emotional affinity lies with the poet as an individual and as a creator, Marshall's lies with the language itself. Her love is for the English language as it reveals itself beside the French.

That translation can somehow bring out the life of a language, that it can reveal the shapes and accents that are its history and its present, is a special writerly pleasure. Joyce Marshall and George Johnston both express their love for translation as a love for the English language. Because of the differences between their two source languages, however, the process of revelation is different. Marshall must come to English *against* French, as it were. Because Johnston is translating from old Scandinavian languages, his English comes *through* them. Johnston tells how he came to discover that the closer he stayed to his texts the more poetic was the result. The forms and rhythms of old Scandinavian gave back to English its strong Nordic origins.

When we turn from language to the more specific area of literary forms and conventions, differing values come into play. Many writers and critics are ready to give up all other criteria of judgement as long as the result of translation is "a poem." But writers and analysts often have difficulty coming to agreement on exactly what that special thing called a poem is. As Robert Melançon comments, with reference to the translations of poems from the Chinese, scholarly accuracy is only one possible element of translation. Melançon's passion lies with literary form. Just as the Renaissance poet learned his craft through the mastering of the sonnet or the Pindaric ode, so the modern poet can use translation to learn to understand language and form. Translation is an apprenticeship of limits, and limits are necessary to the creation of poetry.

In all literary traditions, translation plays a strong role in forming and maintaining literary values. Some nations seem to take this role more seriously than others. In Hungary, a country where translation is quantitatively very important, it is appropriate that translators be prominent writers. Iren Kiss explains that in Hungary the most important writers are also translators. Thus, literature is constantly enriched and developed through translation, and Hungarian readers receive both translated and original works from the same hands. This is an experience which, on the whole, readers of English and French literature have not had.

Despite the evidence of this panel, writers in the English and French traditions have little experience of translation. We can only regret that so few writers venture outside of the linguistic boundaries of their traditions and return to discuss the experience. When they do, their insights clarify many of the most essential values which make up the literary experience.

Barry Callaghan: Translation as Friendship

I know French, but don't really regard myself as a translator, although I now have several collections behind me. But what led me to translate a poet from a language I know nothing about whatsoever—which I happen to have done now with three books? I'll be happy to explain what is involved in that, and may even use the word "mystical" to describe something of the experience.

The French poet Robert Marteau, for some strange reason unknown to man or beast, decided to translate a book of my poems called *The Hogg Poems*, which came out in 1978. After we met he gave me a book called *Atlante*, one of his collections. It's a series of four- and five-line poems, very hermetic, and I decided because they were short and because Robert was translating my work—and he is a brilliant translator—that I'd take a crack at it. I'd never translated before. I did about thirty of these little poems, and realized I was in over my head, but decided to keep going out of tenacity. The book, when it was finished, received good reviews in the learned journals, which amused me enormously because I knew I was skating on thin ice. When I was living in Paris, a collection of Marteau's work came out in English in the United States; he had given me another book of his, the *Traité*, which I found really remarkable. I read the translations in the U.S. collection and wrote to Robert telling him I thought it was unbearable that these particular beautiful poems were so haltingly translated. I set obsessively to work, and within a year finished this book, which was again well received.

Then life got very strange because I discovered that Robert had himself translated a book by a Serbian poet, Miodrag Pavlović. Pavlović was on a reading tour, and the English versions he was reading were awful and inept. This time he gave me a rough English version to work with, and my translation seems to have worked perfectly. I got a sense of the rhythm, then I checked with Pavlović and all seemed to be fine, but I couldn't have known because I don't know any Serbian. I then translated Robert Marteau's version of a volume of Pavlović's poems. I was given to understand that I could trust Marteau's version of the Serbian completely because Marteau is a fastidious man who takes nothing more seriously than poetry. This summer I discovered that Marteau, from whom I had worked, reads no Serbian either. So there are apparently two masterful

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