

Anglophones, Francophones, Barbarophones

Writing in a broken language

Why am I suspicious of linear plot, unified characters and representational claims for fiction, and how does this suspicion reflect my experience as a writer in English in Québec?

First perhaps because anyone who lives in Montréal must deal with conterminous but radically conflicting fictions.

Once upon a time were the glory days of Anglo writing in Québec. F.R. Scott, Klein, MacLennan, Richler, Cohen. Now, splenetic sons and daughters gaze back through the haze of Montréal's economic depression to a time when central Canadian capital flourished and dominated the country from its headquarters on St-James Street, and English was the language of commerce, work and art. This is a tale of longing for a mostly imaginary time of dynamic tensions and cross-cultural influences. An amnesiac's tale of "two solitudes." What's blanked out?

Another reading. Centuries of inequality, oppression by one nationality over the other: humiliation, Lord Durham, porteurs d'eau, Speak White. But this story, too, mutes more ancient native songs. And then, there are the immigrants' stories of broken promises, colour barriers, crowded ghettos.

Aphasia and false memories are the stuff of fiction: lost privilege read as the violation of human rights, historical resentment as tribal impulse, difference as innate cultural backwardness. On the other hand, tales of liberation and identity are always also stories of univocality and elision. Faced with conflicting stories, a writer either kills all but the plot that promises to sell, or struggles for another way of writing that allows for multiplicity of meaning.

Much as I might admire the beauty of those stories that glide perfectly along the Fichtean slope to crisis and resolution, revelation or self-discovery, I can't really believe in them; they could never happen to me. Perhaps I should have read more of that kind of novel. Or less. It's too late now. Sometimes the sense of recognition we get from reading a story — the feeling that 'yes, that's just how things are,' — is just a case of allowing our own experience to be rewritten and jammed, more or less smoothly depending on the quality and quantity of syntactical lubricant employed, into a prefabricated mold. Patterns

of experience are not necessarily natural or universal. They may simply be imposed by a particular cultural context.

Aristotle may well have been right, but if we are driven by the mimetic impulse, we are imitating the stories we've been told at least as much as mirroring some "real" world out there. In any case, who among us can claim to be a recording angel? For a landscape painter, argues Arthur Koestler (I feel like saying "even Arthur Koestler"), "the stimulus comes from one environment, the distant landscape. The response acts on a different environment, a square surface of 10 by 15 inches. The two environments obey two different sets of laws. An isolated brushstroke does not represent an isolated detail in the landscape. There are no point-to-point correspondences between the two planes...."¹

Writing is dream-work: "it is not a word-for-word or a sign-for-sign translation; nor is it a selection made according to fixed rules — as though one were to reproduce only the consonants in a word and to leave out the vowels; nor is it what might be described as a representative selection — one element being invariably chosen to take the place of several; it is something different and far more complicated."²

Of course, as Stephen Heighton pointed out in a past issue of this journal, writing is "never wholly non-representational nor ever can be."³ There is always the play of the world and the word; language is simultaneously plastic and transparent. Writing can never, nor has anyone claimed it could, entirely escape meaning. The question which Heighton does not pose is how to resist the limitations of meaning imposed by conventional narrative forms. How to open up to multiplicity?

There are sites of difference, like Montréal, where the exhaustion of the great emancipatory narratives of modernity becomes more apparent. The sense of uncertainty implicit in the "postmodern condition," wherein the unified rational subject has been dislodged from its position as foundation of all knowledge and truth, opens the door to the possible interplay of forms, the blurring of genres and distinctions between high and popular culture, the

¹ Arthur Koestler, "The Three Domains of Creativity," in *The Concept of Creativity in Science and Art*, ed. D. Drutton & M. Krausz (Boston, Massachusetts: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), p. 12-13.

² Sigmund Freud, "The Dream-Work," in *Contemporary Critical Theory*, ed. Dan Latimer (USA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc., 1989), p. 479.

³ Stephen Heighton, "In the Eye of Language," *Matrix* # 46.

breakdown of form, identity, plot and characterization, and their subsequent transformation into something(s) new.

An open, multivocal space has been made possible by the emergence of voices previously muted or silenced, voices which have highlighted the relations of sex, gender, race, class, ethnicity, nationality, etc.. Recognizing differences does not, however, imply the production of new and "correct" representations of some unmeditated social "reality." Rather than constructing yet another totalizing vision, I prefer to explore the problem of representation itself.

The possibility of a minor literature in a major language.⁴ There is a kind of 'Jewishness' which is neither exclusive nor common to all Jews. At once inside and outside, the idea of Jews, as an inter-national nation, a non-national nation (Zionism notwithstanding), can serve "as a constant reminder of the relativity and limits of individual, self-identity and communal interest, which the criterion of nation was meant to determine with absolute and final authority. [...] They [are] the opacity of the world fighting for clarity, the ambiguity of the world lusting for certainty."⁵

This is not always a popular position. "In a society undergoing accelerated change, the obsession for maintaining old boundaries and, in the event those fail, rapidly drawing new ones, any individual or group that straddles borderlines or confuses identities, any multi-dimensional element that threatens old congruencies, represents a threat and is viewed with abhorrence. Hence the historical imagery of viscosity, the Jew as slime pouring through the cracks of social boundaries."⁶

Which brings me to the second advantage of writing in English in Québec: the immersion in another language, the way one's own tongue is made strange. In a territory of painstakingly negotiated, even legislated tongues, the illusion of language as natural or transparent is difficult to maintain. The result is a kind of language discomfort which can be turned to advantage.

⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, speaking of the Jewish writer Kafka writing in German in Czech Prague, in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

⁵ Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 52-56.

⁶ Bauman, p. 41.

Language, as Charles Bernstein points out, is "not something to be translated away but something to enter into, to inhabit without losing the wildness, the ineffable largesse and poetry, of hearing without mastering or commanding. Unmastering language is not a position of inadequacy; on the contrary, mastery requires repression and is the mark of an almost unrecoverable lack."⁷

A heightened consciousness of language pushes back the "threshold at which noise becomes phonetically significant,"⁸ to give full play to the sound and texture of words, elements which contribute as much to meaning as the strictly denotative aspect.

There is nothing all that new in the idea of the plasticity of language. Mallarmé celebrated free verse as "the historical advent of a linguistic fragmentation in which the verse is violently and deliberately 'broken'.... As the testimony to an accident which is materially embodied in an *accidenting of the verse*, poetry henceforth speaks with the very power — and with the very unanticipated impact — of its own explosion of its medium."⁹

"Mallarmé," Shoshona Felman argues, "thus pursues the accident of *free verse* in the same way Freud pursues, after an accident of dream, the path of *free association*. Both *free verse* and *free association* undergo the process of a fragmentation — a breaking down, a disruption and a dislocation — of the dream, of verse, of language, of the apparent but misleading unities of syntax and of meaning."¹⁰

The accidenting or breaking up of verse and language announced by Mallarmé was both manifestation of and contribution to a broader upheaval in the social consciousness of his time. In a time and place under the sign of deterritorialization and destabilization, nostalgia for old forms, old fictions, the preservation of boundaries and genres is a conservative reflex and a losing proposition.

⁷ Bernstein, "Professing Stein," in *Apoetics* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1992), p.147.

⁸Bernstein, "Artifice of Absorption," p. 12.

⁹ Stéphane Mallarmé, "Crise de vers," cited in Shoshona Felman, "Education and Crisis," in *Imago* vol. 48 Spring 1991, p. 31.

¹⁰ Felman, p.35.

Speaking of storytellers, Homer coined a word for those folks from Asia Minor whose speech, to Greek ears, was an incomprehensible *bara-bara*. He called them barbarophones. And right up until the Fifth century, barbarophones, whether Greek or non-Greek, were those with speech impediments or heavily accented speech.¹¹ In this place of “anglophones” and “francophones,” then, let me be a barbarophone.

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¹¹ Marie-Françoise Baslez, *L'Étranger dans la Grèce Antique* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1984), p.185, cited in Julia Kristeva, *Étrangers à nous-mêmes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 75.