

IS WINTER MY COUNTRY

MY BROTHER, WHO IS MARRIED to a Québécoise woman and whose two children shift languages unconsciously, delightfully, in mid-sentence, reminds me that it's not necessary to speak *mon français limité* in the restaurant in Hull. But I keep on — still hoping, I suppose, for the personality change that comes when you can relax, even for a moment, into another language. It's always a temptation in Canadian life, like finishing a meal with a slice of *tarte aux pommes profondes*.

The bilingual dream needs reiterating when referendums loom, and too many voices sound merely indifferent. We need reminding, perhaps, that support for the right of self-determination (so long as the self-determination of one group is not achieved by ignoring the self-determination of another group) is implicit in the bilingual dream, in what this country has tried, falteringly, but intriguingly, to be. And it makes sense to raise the topic again in an issue of the journal whose essays are written, thanks to the efforts of Heather Murray and Germaine Warkentin, approximately half in French and half in English. Many of the writers in this issue extend the historical contexts for French-English comparative studies; reading the essays, I repeatedly noted the prominence of French in English discourse, particularly in George Lang's puzzling over the absence of a Canadian creole.

To get to Ottawa-Hull from Vancouver we cross a bridge which bears the sign Pont Arthur Laing Bridge, and before the plane takes off the flight attendants walk by handing out magazines in English while talking among themselves in French. Such streetscapes and soundscapes, repeated dozens of times each day for each of us, make a difference. The difference is that we live in a culture where alternatives of expression are a continuing public presence. The mythical cereal box, from this point of view, is not an irritant, the visible sign of something being shoved down throats. It's a sign that Canadians grow up in a country where, from the moment they begin to read, another language is interrogating their mother tongue. What sticks in the throat is another way of saying things — or the discomfort of not knowing how to say things another way.

A considerably more sophisticated investigation of this general subject is found in Sylvia Söderlind's excellent new book *MARGIN/ALIA(S): Language and Colonization in Canadian and Québécois Fiction* (Univ. Toronto Press, \$45.00/\$17.95). Söderlind begins with one of those familiar observations that needs re-stating and re-examining: "Canada's past is, as the ambivalence of its literatures often indicates, a double one: it has been colonized by the French and British but it is also a colonizer of its indigenous peoples." (3) The primary context Söderlind establishes for her reconsideration is the absence of language — while Canada is manifestly part of the "colonizing ... industrialized West," it is also "'colonized' in a specifically cultural and linguistic sense: the Canadian or Québécois writer has no other language than that of the perceived colonizer, whether English or French. No refuge is to be found outside the linguistic territory of the metropolis; no political gesture can be defiantly made by recourse to minority languages, and no common tribal or precolonial past can be conjured up as a challenge in the effort to establish a national cultural identity." (3-4) In her graceful and absorbing analysis, Söderlind pushes to their limits the possibilities of these political ambiguities, both through confident theorizing of the problematics of language and territorialization, and through attentive readings of language and intertext in Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers*, Hubert Aquin's *Trou de mémoire*, Dave Godfrey's *The New Ancestors*, Andre Langevin's *L'Élan d'Amérique*, and Robert Kroetsch's *Gone Indian*.

Söderlind's comparative methodology is not aimed, as has often been the case in Canadian-Québécois comparative studies, at homogenizing a common identity. Indeed she subtly defines the implicit (and unrecognized) cultural differences in ways that make this book essential reading for anyone interested in the literature that results from negotiating two languages. And, when she draws tentative conclusions — for example, Aquin's "active assumption and revisioning of the past" might be a cultural contrast to Cohen's sense of desirably necessary "memory-loss" (108) — she follows with another discerning reading — of Robert Kroetsch — to complicate and interrogate any possibility of neat dichotomy.

Throughout Söderlind's study I noticed the literary importance of a confusion, or blend, of French and English. The unintentionally bilingual sign "Ste. Catherine Street" prompts from Leonard Cohen an inquiry into place-naming "hybridized through French-English contagion." (46) Later, Söderlind patiently probes the bilingual puns in Aquin, and the bilingual wordplay in Godfrey. Cumulatively, such instances suggest that the difficulty of having no recourse to a minority language in which to make a political gesture is in some way resolved in Canadian and Québécois writing by a doubled language, or by relying on a hybridized language where one 'official' language is complicated by the second. The presence of this language we find, of course, in many writers not discussed in *Margin/Alia(s)*: in D. G. Jones, in Anne Hébert, in Daphne Marlatt, and in Michel Tremblay. And

the possibility is reflected in Söderlind's own text: the passages in French are never translated, while English continually illuminates French, and French English in the extraordinary sensitivity of her comparative methodology. The explicit double language is also implicit in a single language (again as Söderlind often points out). I think of George Bowering, for example, in *A Short Sad Book*, where "merde" is as English as "'Is winter my country she said'" is French.

Translation, not surprisingly, is a prominent concern in Söderlind's book. Although she recognizes that recent theorizing about translation extends to understanding verbal communication in the broadest sense, she also emphasizes that translation is an explicit theme in three of the novels she discusses. Moreover, she notes, "the problematics of translation . . . are clearly central to the discussion of territoriality as a measure of the closeness between a literary text and the culture and language to which it belongs. In very simple terms, the more territorial a text, the less translatable it would be." In the considerably more refined, and even wily terms through which this argument develops, one paradoxical possibility posed is that the more visible the problematics of translation, the more Canadian — ironically, deterritorialized — it would be.

I was reminded of this paradox recently, while discussing with a visiting Israeli scholar a model Canadian novel course. It must include, I said, *Pélagie-la-charette*, Anne Hébert, and Hubert Aquin. But, she protested, I'm determined not to teach anything in translation; that is reserved to the French department (which argument will sound familiar to Canadian academics). But, I insisted, you must, in a course on the 'Canadian novel,' include Québécois works, because the tension of translation is a tension which is functional, productive, symptomatic in our writing.

Living in an environment where, absurdly, we make linguistic alternatives, and questions about differences between languages a matter of legislation and the public text, we can not help, I hope, but be tempted, not only by the possibilities of expression in French or English, but also by those in Japanese and Punjabi, Tsimshian and Cree. As Söderlind quotes Leonard Cohen in *Beautiful Losers*: "Watch the words."

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