

# TEXT AND CONTEXT

## *Some Reflections on Translation with Examples from Quebec Poetry*

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**T**O TRANSLATE A POEM, I say to myself, I must first discover its meaning and then translate that into my own language. In certain ways, however, this is impossible.

The meaning of a poem does not reside in the poem alone, but in its relation to other poems, other forms of language, the whole semiotic code in which the author lives. Its meaning is largely a matter of the way it confirms, nuances, or subverts that code. If it merely repeats the code it is an empty cliché; if it bears no recognizable relation to it, it is nonsense; if it does something in between, it becomes meaningful.

For Pierre Nepveu to call a poem “Pepsi” is right away to mark a difference from the previous generations of Quebec poets or Quebec poetry. The poem begins:

pop et pop et pop  
pop-corn et populaire  
pop-si  
toute la journée  
rongées par la fumée  
la bouche en sang les yeux cernés  
dans l'église incendiée  
on a chanté  
pop et pop

The poem means that the content, rhythm, texture of Quebec life has been profoundly altered by the invasion of another language or code, English North American pop culture. The meaning of the poem depends on the relation of French to English (the invasion of the English is obvious); it depends on the relation of the poem and its French to previous poems (this is not the vocabulary, the rhythm — the kind of rhyme and reason — one finds in poems by Anne Hébert, Saint-Denis Garneau, Alain Grandbois, Emile Nelligan — except for lines five, six, and seven); it depends on the relation of certain words or images to those in previous Quebec poems and the language of Quebec generally (Miron writing of “ta maison hantée de l'âme,” Giguère of “Nos châteaux livrés au feu,” Lapointe of “Le vierge incendié”). In the context of traditional Quebec culture, its traditional

code, the jazzy English is like a bunch of be-bopping or discoing teenagers in a burned-out church. Does this carry the meaning that the traditional Quebec culture is being desecrated or that it is undergoing a liberation, or both — is it satirical or lyrical or ironic? This would require more exploration still of the poem in relation to the context.

Now, even if we begin to approach the meaning of the poem, can we really translate it into English?

If we translate this into English and present it by itself to an English reader, it will automatically change its meaning, or much of it. The obvious intrusion of the English into the French will simply disappear. The “pepsi,” “pop,” “pop-si,” and “pop-corn” will serve primarily to reinforce an already accepted part of the code — not to subvert it. In so far as it does appear to collide with the images of smoke and bags under the eyes and a burned-out church, it does so in a way that is confusing, melodramatic, and not very convincing or meaningful — unless the reader is very conservative, more than usually religious, perhaps anti-American. To give the poem what is a normal straightforward translation is not to translate the meaning — since this text in an English context changes its meaning.

Of course, if the reader is really interested to learn, or already knows, something of Quebec and its poetry, she may then translate the poem, imaginatively, back into its Quebec context. At that point the English translation is just one helpful step within a larger exercise in translation.

**T**HE LINES FROM *NEPVEU* suggest the near impossibility of translating the meaning. An example from Anne Hébert may suggest the difficulty of finding the meaning to translate.

Hébert writes a poem called “La voix de l’oiseau,” which begins:

J’entends la voix de l’oiseau mort  
 Dans un bocage inconnu.

The bird sings somewhere to the right of the darkness that surrounds her: “Île noire / Sur soi enroulée. / Captivité.” The poem ends:

De moi à l’oiseau  
 De moi à cette plainte  
 De l’oiseau mort  
 Nul passage  
 Nul secours

Only recently did I recognize the extent to which this strange business of a dead bird singing in some unknown grove may be understood in the context of a poetic code developed in poems by Nérée Beauchemin, Pamphile Lemay, Louis Fréchette,

and, above all, “Le vieux chêne” by François-Xavier Garneau, the father of Quebec history and the great-great-grandfather of Anne Hébert’s cousin, Saint-Denys Garneau. Basically the tree in Garneau’s poem is a symbol of memory, of the continuity through time of the past, which includes the collective identity of French Canada. It is a tree with a bird, “l’oiseau du ciel,” which in itself and in its song mediates between heaven and earth. In this context, Hébert’s poem means that the continuity between heaven and earth, past and present, is broken or blocked. And the speaker appears less trapped in the present than in the past — a black island of trees murmuring in the dark. It is then an island of the dead, where the speaker is a prisoner cut off from the divine and from the living world of light and song.

Of course, one can arrive at something of this meaning by reading the poem in the context of Anne Hébert’s work as a whole. The idea of being trapped and victimized by the dead past, of finding liberation through recognizing her own more or less willing enslavement to it — this is evident in “Le tombeau des rois” (where a bird, wounded but not dead, turns like her heart towards the living light).

We may also glimpse something of the meaning in so far as the poem participates in a larger symbolic code in which birds are spirit messengers — from whom the speaker is here cut off. But in that context the poem is rather vague and skimpy. It is like the fragment of a larger poem in which a more fully developed bird/tree symbolism gives it a rich and particular resonance, a fairly precise negative meaning.

This same bird/tree symbolism, now including Anne Hébert’s contribution to its development, is part of the context of Paul-Marie Lapointe’s “Arbres.” This is an important poem within the context of Quebec literature and culture, not only because of its amplitude, variety, and verve, but because it gives this whole symbolism a new positive development. It re-establishes the continuity between past and present, heaven and earth, bird and human — we end with a cosmic world-tree, its branches full of nests, full of children. Much of the poem’s specific meaning lies in this positive reversal of a symbolic code as it had developed over several generations.

**I** DON’T MEAN TO IMPLY that Hébert or Lapointe is fully conscious of the precise relationships between their texts and the inherited code. In good part the writer works intuitively, adjusting the language as one might adjust a suit of clothes to make it fit, or, as Wallace Stevens would say, to find a satisfaction. In this sense the writer, too, is hardly ever fully or consciously aware of the meaning of the text.

If that is true of the author, it is generally even more true of the translator — though the rare translator may, in fact, have a scholarly grasp of the context that

is more conscious and detailed than the writer's. That would be an ideal situation, but it is one seldom realized. One may confidently say that, as a rule, the translator does not know the meaning of what he is translating.

Secondarily, in the case of these two poems also, it is next to impossible to translate their specific meaning into English for the ordinary reader in Toronto or Calgary or Los Angeles. Trees have been encoded in a quite different way in several generations of Canadian poetry — a tree is really lumber. And the farther west one goes the less anyone is overwhelmingly crushed by the tyranny of the past. The context is different, so the meaning of the poem will be different.

Of course, some readers may have glimpsed, many may have read of, and most may be able to recognize, the possibility of such an experience. To explore such possibilities is no doubt the ultimate role of literature. But when the poem moves into a new context one can never be sure just what meanings the reader may discover in it, just what imaginative possibilities he or she may find to explore.

A corollary to all this is that some poems may be more translatable than others, or more translatable into certain contexts at certain times, (*a*) because they carry more of their context within themselves or work with more broadly conventional, perhaps more archetypal, elements, or (*b*) because the two linguistically different cultures share for the moment certain interests, certain general features in their semiotic codes.

**I**F THE TRANSLATOR doesn't translate the meaning of a text, since he really doesn't know the meaning, what does he translate?

A possible answer is that she translates the meaningful elements of the text — those graphic, lexical, syntactic, formal, and rhetorical features that make whatever meaning the poem has, to the extent that they amplify or alter or violate the inherited code.

Of course, the translator is once again thrown back to the question of context. If she doesn't know the inherited code, how can she tell whether it is a cliché or a violation — an element with a certain meaning or not? From one point of view, this question is irrelevant; whatever the meaning of any element, it is there whether one knows the kind of meaning it carries or not; all one has to do is translate what is there. But, the question becomes relevant when the translator looks for the equivalent in the target language. If she doesn't know how the element relates to the past usage in the original code, how can she tell what is an equivalent in the target code? One can never escape from some measure of circularity and impossibility. One can never be sure one knows what one is doing.

But neither, in the full sense of the word, can the author.

This is to reaffirm the point that translation, like writing poems, is an art — one must work intuitively beyond one's conscious means.

And this is to say also that one is inevitably creating and not just translating meaning. No matter how much knowledge of the context one brings to the text, no matter how sensitive one is to all the meaning-making elements in the original, no matter how resourceful one is in finding equivalents in the target language, by translating the text into another linguistic, literary, broadly semiotic context — which inevitably ramifies beyond any possible awareness and control — one inevitably changes the meaning of the original, creating a new meaning. One neither knows the meaning of what one translates nor the meaning of one's translation. But, except when one utters banalities, or works within very closed or technically arbitrary systems, this is the normal situation. We are all language pushers and looking for a fix.

It is often assumed that when we are dealing with a poem or a translation we are dealing with packaged meanings. Rather we're dealing with meaningful packets of print or language, whose implications are always to some degree indeterminate. It is not *a truth* to be passed on truthfully. That may relieve some of the pressure on translators. It also may allow all kinds of approaches. Like the poem, it may be approached as complex play, as political gesture, as relief from pain, even the pain of boredom. Pop!

## THE COBS FATTEN, BUT EVERY SO OFTEN

*John Steffler*

Mountains come back to these soft lands,  
these dairies. Still after millions of years  
their ghosts march through the sky at first light  
seizing the last of the darkness in crags  
and chasms, rolling grey  
foothills over the sun.

Earth trembles again, black  
cracks split the air — overhead the outline of horned  
crowns, flint weapons, shoulders armoured in skins  
of bears — rough mockery rumbles down,  
the old power to ravage and burn.