

SQUARING THE CIRCLE

The Problem of Translation in “The Temptations of Big Bear”

Deborah Bowen

“Sometimes when I meditate and look,” Big Bear said in Blackfoot, “the sun no longer looks round. It’s starting to look as if it had four corners.”¹

TWENTIETH-CENTURY LINGUISTIC and literary theory has been much concerned to demonstrate the relation between language and vision: we see what we have words to shape. The assumption of absolute relationship between signifier and signified has been profoundly challenged, and as a result there has arisen a new understanding of the political significance of language. If we define ourselves and our environment from within the language of our ideology, then words have power to make and to unmake us at an unsettlingly deep level. It is with the languages of contrasting ideologies that Rudy Wiebe is centrally concerned in *The Temptations of Big Bear*.

Wiebe has written a poignant account of his search for Big Bear’s “sacred bundle,” which he finally tracked down in a New York museum.² He describes the bear’s paw at the core of the bundle, and then he says:

The Cree believe that a person’s soul comes to him at birth and resides along the back of the neck, and so wearing this [bundle] Big Bear felt the weight of the Hand against his soul: he was in the assured, perfect relationship with the Great Bear Spirit.

The soul lives in the base of the neck: on September 13, 1876, Big Bear refuses the treaty by asking the Governor “to save me from what I most dread — hanging; it is not given to us to have the rope about our necks.” And Morris interprets that to mean Big Bear is a criminal, and afraid of literal hanging! A logical enough thought, I guess, for a white man to whom language is always only proposition, and never parable. (*A Voice in the Land* 148)

Language as proposition, language as parable: these two concepts are fundamentally opposed to one another in *The Temptations of Big Bear*, and, though it would

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be an oversimplification of the book to polarize white language and Indian language absolutely, nevertheless there is a core of truth in such a polarization, in that the white man is characterized as the man who writes reports where the Indian is characterized as the man who tells heroic tales. In a stimulating recent paper, Sherrill E. Grace applies the distinctions made by Jakobson, Todorov, and Kristeva to the language of *Big Bear* and concludes that the Whiteskins' language is predominantly that of horizontal, metonymic narrative, where the Indians' language is predominantly that of vertically referential, metaphorical narrative.³ She contrasts the whites' syntactically logical discourse of rationality with the Indians' poetic discourse which disrupts the logic of syntax, and she argues that Wiebe is using such disruption to undermine the constraining dominance of white identity which is dependent upon its particular relationship to language for its very existence. The disparity between the outcome of the historical narrative — the subordination of the Indian to the white man — and the outcome of the poetic narrative — the joyous union of Big Bear with the earth — forces the reader to reassess the basis of his own identity, and to question the assumptions of a language whose victory seems to touch only the rational aspect of man while signally failing to understand his heart.

The role of the translator in this novel is, then, a key role. Like the reader, the translator must listen carefully to two voices, two discourses, and try to interpret them. The difficulty of the task centres upon the fact that these two discourses can scarcely exist in terms of one another. Even to the white man who has some knowledge of Cree, the Indian voice may sound like a wordless chant. This is how Kitty MacLean describes the experience of acting as translator between Big Bear and her father:

Big Bear's voice seemed to be coming from high up, as if it might be only wind turning the leaves on Frenchman Butte so gently that there was no sound whatever of them touching, only the hush of air brushing my ears, reading down to me what already hung there in the air as happened and what with Big Bear's vision had now inevitably touched the earth. I could feel that, like light spiralling back and forth through my hollow head but I could not . . . where did those Cree words come from, I had never heard . . . were they words, they were, sounds . . . as if the high oration had melted into chant, or dirge . . . the old man stood with a wide black hole in the middle of his face and the sound coming out of there.

"What's he saying?" Papa's elbow prodded my knee. "What's that? Kitty!"

But there was only that sound turning in my head. Translate what? And words emerging, spinning over me after a time too, though my mouth could say nothing. (287-88)

The voice is like wind, reading down; like light, spiralling back and forth: for the white man, this is a new relationship between sound and meaning, which he cannot bring from its spinning into a linear progression of cause-and-effect rationality.

On the other hand, to the Indian, the white man's voice may sound like a snore. Here is Big Bear's response to the reading of the charges against him at his trial:

A short, very dry little man was reading loudly from a paper; he read on and on, his thin lips barely moving in one long snore running together in Big Bear's head; if he could have felt wind fondle him and his legs been folded under, not dangling over such a cut edge of chair, he might have fallen asleep to that wavering mosquito. Then Peter had to try again to put words to what he had done wrong, why they kept him in jail over two months though they allowed Horsechild to share his black hole and let him walk once in the sun every day and he listened to the few words which said as much of that long snore as the language of the People could formulate; and as Peter Houri finished Big Bear laughed out loud. (356)

The snore makes Big Bear laugh; it seems to epitomize the flimsiness of the charges against him, the one-dimensional nature of this place where wind and sun are rationed and of this language which uses so many words to create what does not exist. The "black hole" of the white jail is allied to such dry, wavering speech in comparison with the oratory and chant that come from the "black hole" of Big Bear's own mouth.

When the white men do not understand the significance of Big Bear's image of the rope, it is because they are thinking metonymically — that is, they associate "rope" only with the larger concept linked to it in kind. Big Bear is using "rope" metaphorically, to refer to the larger concept of suppression and subordination which is linked to "rope" imagistically. But it is also true that Big Bear's understanding cannot fully grasp the structures of a propositional language: Peter's attempt to translate "crown and dignity" leads Big Bear into a long and confused meditation on the question of the queen's hat and why he might try to throw sticks at it (387). And as Big Bear comes to see that he is not understanding something of great importance to the white man, it is as though "he ha[s] suddenly changed by half a degree all the sign language" (387). This ultimate incomprehension, symbolized by untranslatability, is Big Bear's downfall, as Kitty signals to the reader by her response:

It was impossible. He had always understood every — her thoughts stopped with a terrible lurch that shook the very bench they sat on. . . . It was the abrupt, momentary endless silence of the court, silence complete, with everyone, oddly, sitting there black and white and not so much as breathing. . . . Kitty was staring at Big Bear too. Suddenly devastated. In this silence, now, his great voice, he must now — understand at last she could not understand him — a woman's hat with feathers, what fea — not in the least. The last red edge of the sun slashed across his closed, monolithic, face. (387-88)

There is a silence in which the black-and-white distinctions that have been predetermined by the dominant system are felt presences, unconquerable on their own territory. It is not that Big Bear lacks intuitions — far from it: he is throughout

the book presented as the man of sensibility and spiritual understanding. But he is at a loss before those specifically rational constructs of a white society for which he has no comparable entities in his own language; the concepts of “crown” and “dignity” are untranslatable because the whole notion of statecraft for the Indian is based on premises of vision and prowess recognized within the community, rather than on the premise of ascribed authority exercised from outside the community. In this white world even the circle of the sun becomes Big Bear’s enemy and slashes his face with its last red edge.

The basic problem, then, is that the holistic world of the Indian will not translate into the linear terms of the white man, nor can the white man’s propositional images be translated into the Indian’s organic ones. When the Magistrate asks Big Bear whether he recollects the nature of the charge brought against him, Big Bear speaks thus to Peter Hour, the translator with the “good quiet face, folded brown together like land in a long autumn”:

“My friend, I have seen this Whitehair and I remember him,” and he told him at length, gently; Peter’s head tilted a little, his right hand on his heart the way he always stood, struggling to fight clear some meaning between them. Big Bear concluded, “I understand what he wants to tell me, and you understand, but we haven’t been given words or signs for it, so just let him say his white things.” Hour stared gloomily at him, and translated finally:

Prisoner: “No, I don’t recollect it, nor did I understand what was the charge laid against me. I do not understand that.” (355)

“I understand but I have no words” is translated “I do not understand”: the irony of the translator’s task could not be more graphically presented. At other places in the book, it is the white man who is in a vulnerable position, and the Indians’ world-view that dominates. Here is the description of Governor Morris’s meeting with Sweetgrass and the Indian bands at the signing of Treaty Six:

The Governor did not like his position; having marched up the slope to the flagpole at the head of his party, the band tootling quite impressively at last into the vast air — all that repetition of only three tunes — he now faced straight into the lowering sun. By some oddity he had never before been on a council flat at this time of day; the Indians circled before him seemed not so much human as innumerable mounds the earth had thrust up since morning; there was a strange yellow and blackness about the still, brilliant air, a kind of crystal lack of shading that made alert thinking seem silly. As if there were only inevitabilities into which all, irresistibly, moved. He shook his head; the outlined smile on the old face before him smudged, wavered, and he widened his own smile, gesturing in apology with his head at the sun; shifting to his left. Sweetgrass understood. With half a step the Governor had cut off the sun against the chief’s raven headdress; he must concentrate. He must. (17)

The discomfort of the Governor on the Indians’ home territory is indicated by the difference in Morris’s and Sweetgrass’s attitudes to the sun: Wiebe suggests that the Indian is at home with, at one with, the sun, able even to regulate it (it is the

chief's headdress that cuts off the sun for Morris), where Morris is reduced to irritability, wavering and uncertainty. Two kinds of clarity are contrasted: the clarity of "alert thinking" and the clarity of "the still, brilliant air." The crystalline light somehow renders propositional thought not merely inadequate, but "silly." Now it is the Governor's turn to "fight clear" some substance to his words, but the kind of concentration to which he is accustomed is alien to this environment which prefers the certainties of the earth to the subtleties of rational structure.

"WORDS ARE NOT JUST SOUND," says Big Bear to Kitty MacLean (314). Communication requires a communion of minds; it requires, in effect, a spiritual element, where the wholeness of one person can be received in a known context by the wholeness of another. Kitty MacLean plays a central role in *The Temptations of Big Bear* precisely because she is able to communicate with Big Bear at a level of spiritual awareness. In a very beautiful scene, she receives a new sense of her own identity from Big Bear exactly because she can translate more than "just words":

"I want to be more like you. A Person," she added after a moment because he did not say anything looking over the water that a wind ruffled slightly, suddenly a wedge widening. . . .

He seemed to be studying the lake, the muscles of his naked arm beside her like smooth tinted rocks. He smelled of smoke and sweat, sharply sweet; she felt her legs, arms, outer and inner parts of her whole body loosening as if they were clothes being unhooked. He was speaking then, saying a thing she heard his voice say several days later as if he were speaking aloud to her, then: "Blackbirds live by water and leave diving to the ducks." But here, where this water barely frothed against these rocks and sand she could not have said she heard it. All he said to her was,

"The Sun will warm you."

So she took off her clothing. . . . the sun bulged over her stark in the livid sky and heat began weaving loops of warmth about her. She felt herself becoming again, the farthest tips of her moving out towards fire until she knew herself too complete to comprehend, too enormous, each unknown part of her vastness she could not yet quite feel but which would certainly surround the whole earth bending back under her. And there was the heat, it rounded her head and he was passing over in his dance between the long green rushes, the curves of his massive chest ablaze above her, chant reaming the hollows of her head up through the sand that held her body and gradually arching her distended and enormous as if she were poised by planets rocking, singing her suspended while Sun devoured her warmer and warmer until she was suffused. Herself; completely; open and radiant. Held in his chant, rocked in his radiance.

"Words are not just sound," the old man said. "Now I will tell you the story of Bitter Spirit." And he did.

She never remembered a word of it. . . . (313-14)

Kitty's entrance into full personhood is described as an experience of union with the universe ("... as if she were poised by planets rocking . . .") whose secrets Big Bear already knows: the sun's warmth and light become the curves of his blazing chest, his radiance. The part played by words in this episode is extremely significant. When Kitty speaks to Big Bear, he is silent; when he does speak, his remark seems highly tangential and she hears it only several days later. Then, "The Sun will warm you": "so," writes Wiebe, "she took off her clothing." Though to the rational mind this response must seem a-logical, its naturalness is reinforced throughout the passage by the emphasis on the primacy of feeling and chant over thinking and word. Finally Big Bear tells Kitty a story, of which she remembers nothing but to which she listens intently. For the significant interaction in this meeting has nothing to do with the referential function of language and everything to do with its phatic and poetic modes in the service of intuition and communion. Sherrill Grace suggests that Kitty functions in *The Temptations of Big Bear* as a reader-surrogate, who is essentially the translator of two languages, two modes of discourse, and who therefore represents the possibility of freedom from the constraints of ideological language that the text offers to the reader who will consciously take this median role. In the description of her "becoming," we may see that degree of awareness and sensitivity to another mode of existence which the white reader too is called to exercise in absorbing the story of the Indian as Wiebe presents it.

"The sun bulged," "loops," "curves," "arching," "rocking" — the passage just quoted is filled with notions of roundness, suggestive of the curve of earth and sun. Once earlier in the novel Wiebe uses the image of "rocking": it occurs in his description of Big Bear's last buffalo hunt:

He was the curl of a giant wave breaking down upon and racing up the good beach of earth. . . . Dust, bellows, shrieks, rifle explosions, grunts were gone, only himself and the bay stallion rocking suspended as earth turned gently, silently under them in the sweet warmth of buffalo curling away on either side . . . and then there was only the cow, . . . as she ran true the great curve of earth, as he drifted to her shoulder and his arrow for an instant pointed her like the giant constellation of the wolf road points the sky at night and instantaneously it grew in her, the feathers grew in the coarse streaming hair of her shoulders tight against her thin wiry summer curls and her rhythm rippled momentarily. . . . In the circle of sun and sky and earth and death he stood complete. (128-29)

It is characteristic of the mode of discourse used by Wiebe when describing the Indians that words conveying roundedness move the sentences in a rhythmic and syntactically disruptive way. One full sentence within the buffalo-hunt passage takes more than seventeen lines of text, the clauses joined only loosely by present participles or conjunctions such as "and" and "then," or merely juxtaposed with no conjunctive markers. The cow buffalo "ran true the great curve": she did not merely run along it, but became one with it — the unusual use of a transitive form

of the verb “run” makes this the necessary interpretation. The verbs throughout this passage are powerful and often unexpected: Big Bear and the horse “rocking,” the buffalo “curling,” the arrow which “pointed her” — again this use of a transitive verb where one would expect an intransitive. The stress is on the unity between universe and man and beast; so strong is the bond that the buffalo hunt can be described not as something frantic, energetic and destructive, but rather as something gentle and natural. “Suspended,” “silently,” “drifted,” “grew” — these are not terms one would expect to associate with a hunt. In fact the felling of the buffalo is likened to the light of a constellation in the night sky, and the arrow within her seems to blossom. The strikingly non-violent way in which Wiebe describes a violent event emphasizes again the rightness of the act within the cycle and circle of the natural order: “In the circle of sun and sky and earth and death he stood complete.”

The contrast between circle and square, roundness and linearity, gentleness and angularity, is perhaps most acutely drawn in the passage which describes Big Bear’s view of his country after he is released from jail. His vision comes to him slowly and brings great pain:

The land lay its endless circle around him in distant bluish levels tilting and curving slightly against and over each other; he looked everywhere under the bright sky but there was no sun to be found. . . . He saw then that straight lines had squared up the land at right angles, broad lines of stark bleached bones had been spread straight, pressed and flattened into the earth for him to ride over, and sliced into hills as if that broad thong of bone could knuckle them down, those immovable hills. As far as he could see, wherever he looked the world was slit open with unending lines, squares, rectangles, of bone and between the strange trees gleamed straight lines of, he comprehended it suddenly, white buildings. Square inedible mushrooms burst up under poplars overnight; but square. . . . He was seeing; the apprehension which the settler-clustered land of Manitoba and Winnipeg’s square walls and gutted streets had begun drove like nails into the sockets of himself and his place was gone, he knew Earth and Sun which had been his gifts to accept and love and leave to others were gone, all gone. (408-09)

In this passage lines and squares are portrayed as fundamentally unnatural and destructive — “the world was slit open.” Where the killing of a buffalo became almost an act of love, the building of a city becomes an act of violence. Where the arrow in the buffalo seems to flower into life, the streets of the city are like nails in Big Bear’s skull. The transfer of the expected epithets forces the reader to reconsider the ground of his own understanding, his own cultural mores which give him his sense of right and wrong and define him as himself. Where circles are characterized as expansive, life-giving, at one with earth and sun, lines are characterized as flattening, slicing, restrictive, and destructive: by denying the true nature of the land, they prevent it from being itself. Linearity in *The Temptations of Big Bear* is expressed in the fences, military parades, and legal documents of the white man,

and supremely in the railway, the "iron road" which divides the Indian from the buffalo and which represents the ruthless and unnatural hand of white "progress" through the land and the book. When Big Bear imagines that he is beginning to see the sun with four corners, he is defining imagistically that unnaturalness which the white man's ideology brings to Indian territory. For the white man's language changes the geography of the land, quite literally: his mode of thought and of expression leads the white man to handle the land in a way that is diametrically opposed to the Indian way of communion and oneness, and as a result the landscape becomes unrecognizable.

But Wiebe ends with the end of Big Bear and a reassertion of the pattern of the circle. On the Sand Hills Big Bear feels "a warm weight against his soul," the great sacred bear-paw, and "Such happiness broke up in him then he had to turn the complete circle to see everything once more in the beautiful world that had once been given him" (415). As he lies down in the cold sand and snow, his last sight is of "the red shoulder of Sun at the rim of Earth." Finally every suggestion of linearity is removed from him as sand and snow sift "over the crevices of his lips and eyes, between the folds of his face and hair and hands, legs; gradually round[ed] him over" — as he came from the earth, so he returns to it. Because his life has involved an understanding of the circularity of the natural order, his death is peaceful. For the white man, separated from the circle of the earth, death is much more definitively the end of a line, and therefore much more to be feared.

IT IS SIGNIFICANT FOR THE READER, the translator of these discourses of circle and square, that Wiebe finally privileges the circular over the linear. For the linear is essential to the storyteller, to the tale told, if the listener is to have any real understanding of the progression of event. But by privileging the circle, Wiebe makes particular play with the mode of the novel form. A novel is never merely a linear narrative; its nature as a completed entity with a final page creates it as an essentially cyclic event, where the reader inevitably reads each succeeding moment in the light of all that has gone before, and may at any moment refer back to an earlier page for confirmation of an emergent notion. In a sense any work of art partakes of this completedness and therefore of this self-referentiality; it is the very fact of completedness which gives to the artwork its satisfying aura of the "simulacrum of eternity," the world in miniature which is within man's grasp and where, like God, he can see the end from the beginning. Of course within this framework of the complete form, the novelist may emphasize one mode of discourse over another. If he chooses to emphasize the linear, realistic mode, his novel will tend towards the adventure-story. If he chooses to emphasize the cyclic, symbolist mode, his novel will incline towards the allusive density of poetry. Wiebe

makes this second choice, for reasons essentially identifiable with the purposes of his book.

By placing his novel firmly on the parabolic rather than the propositional side of the balance, Wiebe encourages the reader to particular care with "translation," and to an awareness of his own deeper message: that the humanity of man is best expressed not through conflict with the natural order but through harmony with its rhythms and cycles, and that man's allegiance to sequential time is inadequate unless it is harnessed to an appreciation of the cyclical times and seasons of the earth. Within the created sphere of his novel, Wiebe privileges a consciousness of the many-layered and turning circle of the earth, and of a people whose language is in tune with the turning. Since language is power, then the power of the artist who recreates a lost sensibility has an authority far beyond that of mere narrative. By expressing the conflict of the white man's square with the Indians' circle, Wiebe has given the reader the possibility of recognizing the shackles of his own linguistic consciousness, and thereby being afforded some degree of liberty from them. Big Bear had to die to rediscover freedom; perhaps the reader need only understand the lesson of the rolling Sand Hills.

NOTES

- ¹ Rudy Wiebe, *The Temptations of Big Bear* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1984), p. 93. All further references to this book will be indicated by page numbers in the text.
- ² Wiebe, "Bear Spirit in a Strange Land," in W. J. Keith, ed., *A Voice in the Land: Essays By and About Rudy Wiebe* (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1981), pp. 143-49.
- ³ Sherrill Grace, "Structuring Violence: 'The Ethics of Linguistics' in *The Temptations of Big Bear*," *Canadian Literature*, 104 (Spring 1985), 7-22. I am indebted to this article for the theoretical underpinnings of my own paper.

THIS IS THE DAY

Susan Musgrave

I have nothing under my skirt
 but a whole lot of lessons I never learned
 properly. The man labouring on the road
 senses that, and waves a fingerless hand
 hoping for a quick throw over the lunch hour.