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Speaking as a Spatial Subject

Review of Simon, Sherry. *Translating Montreal: Episodes in the Life of a Divided City*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006. 242p.

Tur Malka, Mons Regium, Mont Réal or Mont Reale – known as Mont or Mount Royal today, the mountain towering over the city of Montreal has had many names. The city that the mountain lends a name to is also borne out of many languages. Montreal, a First Nation territory that was taken first by the French, then by the British, has been a battleground of linguistic survival. Officially bilingual from 1760, the city was polarized around *la question linguistique*: the anxieties concerning “linguistic hierarchy, English unilingualism, and an ability on the part of Anglophones to ignore the predominantly Francophone society around them” (Levine 1991, 216). With English as the language of upward mobility, Montreal was seen as an English city until the 1960s when the French majority began to assert its cultural, linguistic and economic prerogatives. French is the host language of Montreal today. However, as Sherry Simon writes, the “sounds of today hover over the murmurs of the past” (2006, 11): the city has retained the traces of linguistic discomfort and too much closeness – the histories of forced and failed encounters between languages.

It is against this background that Simon draws Montreal's cultural map. While language is the determining factor in Simon's understanding of culture, and her readings of local literary translations form the core of the book, admirably her focus is not on textuality alone. As *Translating Montreal's* title suggests, Simon's project is to extend language relations to spatial relations; setting out to interpret what the city means, she uses the social medium of language to understand space. In order to do this, Simon first examines the implications of the binary structure that defined the city from its division into two separate districts in 1792, to the emergence of French linguistic nationalism. The Montreal of the past is constructed in the book as a city of borders where the language one speaks readily designates one's place in life. Language might build worlds, but here it is also the means of closure: it places and keeps

one firmly either in Francophone east or Anglophone west. Montreal's geographical division reinforces the linguistic one, and vice versa. In the city, language and space are invested, it seems, in supporting the ideal of self-sameness: on both sides of the dividing line that is Montreal's Saint Lawrence Boulevard, the imperative for the language communities is to be one with themselves while keeping only to themselves.

Boundaries, however, are prone to leakings. Drawing on *Le mur de Berlin P.Q.*, the Montreal writer Jean Forest's linguistic autobiography from 1983, Simon writes: "the problem is not that there is a figurative Berlin Wall [in the Province of Quebec] separating east from west, but that the wall does not do its job properly" (45). Boundaries are usually associated with power, while power's deconcentration takes shape in leaks. *Translating Montreal* helps us realize that the violation of how different subjects inhabit space is not performed by the lines of division alone. In infiltrating one's place with the other, leaks expose one's vulnerability in the other's unexpected and uncontained presence. In Montreal's "unequal bilingualism", word borrowings from English to French constituted such a leak.

The city's Upper Lachine Road or Chemin Upper Lachine is a case in point. Legend has it that in the 17th century, the French explorer Robert de La Salle ambitiously named a western suburb of Montreal after China ('La Chine'), a country he eventually failed to reach via the Saint Lawrence River. The meaning and the role of the English word 'upper' has also changed: originally a modifier, it lost its indicational value as there is no lower part of the road that it could refer to. 'Upper' became a cypher, and a proper name itself. The name Upper Lachine is thus an example of untranslatability, given that "translation must make cultural sense, and here the operation of transfer is impossible" (44). An assemblage of English and French imaginary geographies that nevertheless concretizes a place in French Montreal, Upper Lachine cannot but leave the same mark on both linguistic landscapes.

As the above indicates, sometimes there is not *enough* difference between languages to allow translation. This means that translatability is more of a goal than a given. Especially in Montreal, as Simon shows, translation is not a fact. Translatability requires proximity, but proximity does not automatically constitute an inhabitable relation; it does not bring one closer to the other. Following the Indian social theorist Ashish Nandy, Simon argues that in a

divided city, proximity sours: the other is constructed and retained merely as a negative identity for the self. A mutually affirming encounter cannot happen unless a multicultural consciousness is adopted. What is needed, however, is not only an ideal of pluralism but an extension of the self to the other, that is: the conversion of proximity from a spatial fact to the experience of the other as an essential, unalienable part of the self.

Allowing movement between languages, translation is seen as a means of bringing about such a consciousness of others. In the “divided”, “dual”, “double” city, it is also pointedly a spatial consciousness. Simon’s archetypal translator is a going subject: like the journalist Malcolm Reid, author of the cultural study *The Shouting Signpainters* (1972), s/he crosses lines and languages to let the encounter happen. Reid left the west for the Francophone east to translate *joual*, the language of the streets and also the language of the literature of French Montreal’s emerging left nationalism. Englishing the *déclassé* French idiom in his cultural study, Reid also translated ideas, making Quebec radicalism available for a new public.

Translating Montreal covers a diverse range of literary works. Given that the period Simon examines extends from the 1950s to the present, most of the discussed texts are contemporary. Because Montreal provides the singular organizing frame for the book, literature is discussed primarily in relation to the city. The book is divided into 6 chapters that focus on how texts create new connections when transferred from French to English (Chapter 1); Yiddish to English (Chapter 2); and Yiddish to French (Chapter 3). Simon’s argument throughout is that translation’s function is to administer the passage of one culture into the other. Furthermore, translation as a social practice has the potential to transform translated languages from being merely the object of transfer, to being more capacious, agentive, translating ones. As an effect of translation, languages expand and become contact zones, in turn recreating the city as a place of belonging. As the Montreal essayist and poet Pierre Nepveu says in Chapter 3, Jewish culture “lives in me, it is part of my cultural universe” (118). Simon points out that Nepveu can only read Yiddish in translation. The survival of a language, then, does not only depend on one’s ability to speak it; rather, a language can be shared if the culture it projects is recognized as being constitutive of the self.

In Chapter 4, the Anglo-Montrealer novelist Gail Scott expresses a similar view, but talks about a structure of belonging that is different to Nepveu's. She says: "French language and culture in a sense also *belong* to me; it is [sic] part of my cultural background, make-up" (126-127, italics in original). Many of Scott's characters are bilingual and she frequently employs code-switching in her writing. However, language-crossing results in mixed expressions whereby the regulatory function of translation is compromised. As in the case of pseudotranslations - texts masquerading as translations - the *idea* of translation is used and abused. Here, translation is deployed not to provide access, but to confuse "the relations between subject and object, between the original and the translated text" (160). Producing perverted, disrespectful texts, these "muddy" translational practices also reflect on the city's Francization; on how the changes in Montreal's language relations cannot be interpreted as a total, mechanistic, unambiguous reversal of power. Self-reflexive and surprising, they suggest a special kind of contact whereby translation eventually finds its objects in proximity: not in foreign worlds, but in the mundane, yet turbulent space of the everyday.

It needs to be noted here that, for Simon, Montreal's Jewish diaspora structurally reinforces, rather than challenges, the binary spatio-linguistic framework established by the book. Jewishness is seen as a marker of difference *within*: one expresses one's Jewishness either in English or French. It is left to Chapter 4 to let the binary fold into something unexpected; here, space is constructed as claimed and reclaimed, suspended, elusive. In a puzzling way, Chapter 5 returns us to the problem of the divided city. The chapter discusses "immigrant" writing. In Simon's words, allophones, immigrants whose mother tongue is neither English nor French, "enter the city's conversations as a third partner, in an always-triangular configuration" (11). The image of the triangle, the references to the "age of immigration" and the threat of a linguistic Babel seem redundant both in terms of a growing metropolis, and, more importantly, in the terms already set by the book. Paradoxically reaffirming the notion of the two halves, the image of the triangle identifies Anglo-French relations as the privileged site of linguistic trouble. This implies that one not only needs to adopt either of the two 'home-grown' languages; it is also imperative that they find an identity in either of these two cultures so that they can 'be' in Montreal. Presenting immigration as a relatively new phenomenon, Simon also contradicts the message of her Chapter 6 that is devoted to the

many histories of the Mo(u)nt Royal. Seen from the mountain, says Simon, it seems clear that “Montréal in fact would be, *ab ovo*, a translation” (193, italics in original).

Perhaps the book would have benefited from a theoretical chapter to avoid the above contradictions. On the whole, however, *Translating Montreal* is an interesting read that successfully creates an intersection between space and translation studies. Using space as a source text of translation might not seem an obvious choice. However, as Simon reminds us, translation in Latin “is understood as a form of turning (*vertere*), and in medieval French *turner* was one of the verbs used for translation” (119, italics in original). Turning is an action that necessitates an awareness of space: when we turn towards something, “*it is from here that the world unfolds*” (Ahmed 2006, 28, italics in original). Such turnings, as both Simon and Ahmed remind us, are not innocent: what we perceive when we turn reveals how we are oriented toward the world. In Montreal, one orients oneself by using the river and the mountain as cardinal points. This unconventional compass making Montreal the only city where the sun rises in the south, the understanding of turnings remains crucial.

References

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