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Self-Effacement in the Poetry and Translation of Marc Plourde

by Kasper Hartman

"...all the birds sing out / at once to become / her speaking..." (Plourde, *TWM* 32)

The act of crossing from one language to another is a literal and quite common occurrence in Quebec. The translator is not continents and oceans away from the author he/she translates; rather they often share the same metro-car, the same bar or park bench. Many translations by and/or of local authors tend toward creative licence and the overshadowing of the original author by the presence (or ego) of the translator—the source text serving as a site of inspiration rather than a template for reproduction. The sense that literal translation is impossible or undesirable leads some translators to abandon the voice of the original author and accentuate their own. Many of Peter Van Toorn's "mountain poems" or Erin Moure's "trans*e*lations" (and to a lesser extent D.G. Jones's translations of Gaston Miron) offer examples of creative translation, a model that suggests that cultural contact can (and perhaps should) result in outbursts of creation. In contrast to this more playful approach is Marc Plourde, whose rigorous translations of Gaston Miron are vested in an ideal of self-sublimation—an ideal (also present in his poetry) which characterizes him as an ego-less writer, a writer whose writing depends in great part upon losing himself in his subjects, and in the poetic subjectivities he encounters.

In his introduction to *Cross/cut* Peter Van Toorn describes the tumultuous social and political conditions in Quebec in the 1970's and their effects on poetic disposition. The poet, says Van Toorn, is "[. . .] trying to be at home in the wilderness, not of trees, though that too, but of faces, varieties of speech, sensibility, ways of being" (33). Canada has often been described as a nation with an identity crisis, a pluralist haven that accommodates all but embraces no one. But the Anglo-Quebec poet is in a unique position; he/she is rooted in a culture of Anglo-Canadian pluralism (which, some would argue, verges on cultural nihilism), and yet is in a position to observe (and sometimes struggle against) the often passionate forms of identity-building that characterize the Francophone community: "As Canada has begun to crystallize in response to Québec's rigorous introspection and subsequent metamorphosis, successive generations of Canadian poets in Québec have endeavoured to mediate the gap" (Van Toorn 33). Ultimately, Van Toorn argues, life in Quebec provides "a working political metaphor: a motion of becoming" (32). This "motion of becoming" in Marc Plourde's poetry (and later in his translations) is a motion of becoming someone else—it characterizes the gestures of an outwardly focused speaker who approaches other subjects with a sense of longing and openness, and who finds himself only through contact with others. As Plourde articulates this position of an extremely other-dependant mode of self identification, "only the touching of your mouth tells me where I am" (*T* 14). Plourde's poetic mode—unique in its ability to depict otherness without judgment or sentimentality—culminates in his translations of Gaston Miron, which not only provide the English-speaking audience an exceptional glimpse into the heart of one of Quebec's premier poets, but also offer it a model of translation that is rooted in an aesthetic of self-sublimation.

Anglo-Quebec anthologies are filled with poets—like Klein, Cohen, Layton, Solway, Harris, and Van Toorn—who exude the confidence of a hard-won individuality. In the face of Quebec's "wilderness" a common response for the Anglo-Quebec writer is determined self-assertion. Each of these poets is, of course, far more dynamic than such brief mention can accommodate, but in general throughout their poetry one hears the voice of a fully formed speaker and notices the gestures of a clearly struck pose. In contrast to poets who carve out clear positions in relation to their surroundings and subject matters (Cohen in relation to language, Layton in relation to women, Solway in relation to poetic craft) and who regularly express themselves in boldly musical terms (Van Toorn or Harris), the speaker in Marc Plourde's poems seems withdrawn and unmelodic, and yet he offers no less significant a model for a kind of poetic impulse that is specific to the Anglo-Quebec poet. Rather than articulate a voice and ego in response to linguistic minority status, Plourde (bilingual from infancy) finds poetic energy by dissolving into the culural and social fabric that surrounds him.

Marc Plourde's poetic speakers are characterized by vacancy and longing—they are observers who look out toward the world. They seldom vocalize their desires and as a result one would be hard-pressed to say anything definitive about who they are or what positions they take in relation to their subject matters. Plourde's poetry enacts a movement toward other subjectivities; time and time again his speaker gazes outward in an effort to find meaning in the sound/being of another. The strength of Marc Plourde's poetry is visual/mental rather than acoustic / oral. It is poetry of the eye and mind more so than of the mouth and ear, though sound does play a significant thematic role in bridging the gap between disparate subjectivities. This is not to say that Plourde's poetry cannot be effective when read aloud, but rather that it sounds deceptively simple, almost conversational. The diction is honest and straightforward, demanding that we focus on what is being said more so than how musical it sounds. "The Tractor," like many of the poems in *The White Magnet*, opens with a sparse landscape that is gradually populated by a series of precise images and details that build toward the assembly of a world:

> The tractor has been junked
> for years; where it lies
> at the far end of the field, no one sees fit or worth
> bothering to haul it away—
> and it has fixed itself to the land, secure
> as the mountains behind. At dusk
>
> it becomes only a red
> blotch in that distance, the last thing gone.
> (Plourde 31)

The short lines and abrupt line-breaks bring us into this world one minute detail at a time. We are asked to pause over each self-contained image—the old tractor, the field, the mountains, and the final red blotch—as they construct a setting which resonates with implications of obsolescence and melancholic decay. Once the setting is complete the poet positions people within it:

> I have watched this happening
> for the past hour or so from the fence;
> on the other side a girl
> is moving toward some horses
>
> with a bridle, making small gestures at them.
> (31)

Though the speaker is seemingly idle (idle in a physical sense) his entire being is gradually directed toward the girl. Just as she gestures toward the horses in the field, so does Plourde's speaker gesture toward her ultimately allowing himself to be subsumed by her presence as she begins to dominate the poem:

> She did not know whose tractor it was,
> not her father's. South
> of us, in the marshland, insects
> and birds and frogs waken with the dark;
> it is why she pointed
>
> that way as she left, hearing them before me.
> (31)

Now that the other has entered this setting and the poetic gesture toward her been made, the silence/stillness/frozen decay of the first stanza is turned into a cacophony of life:

> Louder now, their noise reaches
> even into the houses. It is the sound
> of an old machine
> wheeling past us—impossible
> to tell toward which direction, or where it came from.
> (31)

By her simple act of coming and going ("as she left") the girl animates the speaker's entire world. She does not literally cause the tractor to start up again, but by waking his awareness to the buzz of living things, she guides the speaker into a world of motion where the tractor can move in possible past and future tenses. In this poem, like in many others by Plourde, a speaker whose being is characterized by vacancy (both in terms of his inner self and his immediate surroundings) gestures toward another so that the other can in turn gesture toward a wider world in time.

The movement of an empty speaker toward the other can be traced throughout Marc Plourde's poetry. "Sparrows," "Branches," "Where I Began," "For Monnie," "The White Magnet," "Staircase," "The Man in the Station," "Behind Rain," "Some Time Spent on Rachel Street," and "The Tractor" (all poems from *The White Magnet*) begin with the introduction of a lyric speaker—ostensibly the same shy speaker throughout—and move toward a final sublimation of that speaker in favour of the other (the other becomes the subject). An underlying theme of many of these poems is inclusion and belonging as the speaker seeks to address his own sense of otherness. There is something of a foreigner about Plourde's lyric speaker; he enters cautiously into his own poems—there are no sweeping rhetorical gestures which risk startling anyone who might be nearby. In "Sparrows," for example, he arrives in a place whose symbolic sense of community (a bird's nest) is already clearly defined: "When I came, the nest was already built" (19). Though he is an outsider in relation to this community, the speaker is nonetheless drawn toward it, and there is an indication that he would have much less sense of himself if the community were not there ("they wake me"):

> It is like some large crab hugging the cabin's ceiling.
> It is the first thing I see every morning after
> they wake me.
> (19)

The experience of time is intensely focused in Plourde's poetry. The speaker cannot believe he is still an outsider after almost one week of living in the vicinity of the bird's nest:

> The large one, the mother I think, now perches outside
> on the open door, and pecks wood.
> I've lived here almost one week
> and still she considers me an intruder.
> (19)

During these periods of exclusion the speaker is aware of the slow passage of time, every moment of unwanted solitude building upon another so that one week can feel like a lifetime. The speaker is not only an outsider, but an intruder who disrupts the familial routine that existed previous to his coming:

> Each time she enters, she startles in mid flight
> undecided whether to continue to the nest or leave.
> At the top of the nest
> are four bald heads bobbing in and out, each mouth
> a gap red as nailpolish. They sing for food.
> (19)

The movement toward song at the end of the poem is reflective of the way in which music is not so much a mode in Plourde's work as it is a theme—musicality is neither a means nor an end for Marc Plourde, but an experience that allows him to make contact with the world. In other words, it is never the speaker opening his mouth to sing, but rather opening his ears in order to lose himself in the songs of others:

> The singing they make is something I remember of a park
>   I knew once,
> or what I dreamt of that place before waking: the sound
> of swings still balancing themselves back & forth
> moments after they'd been left.
> There was also the old park keeper in a white hat
> and some children following him to the gate.
> (19)

In this particular case, the bird's song inspires the speaker's withdrawal deeper into the poem, into the space of memory, as a way of further sublimating himself in favour of other subjects. There is no trace of him in the final four lines, and one is tempted to read him (as he seems tempted to read himself) amongst the children scurrying into the park.

The most striking example of this tendency to sublimate the lyric self in favour of other subjects appears is the poem "Branches." A young man describes his work in an apple orchard. He is once again an outsider, a city boy who is "unable to repair fences / or help on the tractor, slow at my task and it seemed / even in the smallest things I failed" (*TWM* 20). In the course of this poem the speaker introduces four new subjects—a girl in the orchard, her brother, a woman shot by soldiers, and a Greek boy climbing a pole. Each of these subjects gives the speaker someone new to focus on, a community into whose company the speaker can retreat from his own sense of inferiority and exclusion (a gesture which, ironically, accentuates his exclusion). The most interesting of these characters is the "old woman shot by soldiers / by mistake: she failed to answer their challenge, / she was deaf" (20). The anachronism of this war-time murder in the middle of an apple orchard poem suggests that the loss of hearing is a highly charged symbol of misfortunes in the poetic world of Marc Plourde, certainly much greater than a loss of speech. The irony of a poetic speaker who never speaks (never vocalizes in dialogue) and prefers rather to listen and observe others is rooted in Plourde's aesthetic of self-sublimation. Marc Plourde is the writer of his poetry; his lyric persona is the speaker of his poems. But closer engagement reveals a speaker who is really a listener, someone who finds poetic energy—and who finds himself—in the sounds of others. By far the darkest and least hopeful of Plourde's poems are the ones in which the speaker is alone and therefore forced to concentrate on an absent landscape which torments him by reflecting his own emptiness. In "The White Magnet," for example, the speaker finds himself in harsh surroundings which are all but devoid of life:

> No other movement or sound in this country—one spot
>   soft blue-brown
> insect in a sugar bowl
> I am walking, the whiteness all about me.
> (*TWM* 31)

There is only a motionless insect, a despondent metaphorical attempt by the speaker to see himself in something else; it is not enough to satisfy his need for another subject. With no one to gesture towards he wanders aimlessly and leaves no trace of his presence:

> Everywhere winter's clean perfect burn,
>   the pure ash
> curved over belly and heart
> of this land I step across, it leaves nothing.
> (*TWM* 31)

Almost all of Plourde's poetic landscapes are empty; it is the existence of others and the possibilities of contact and community that make the emptiness bearable. But in "The White Magnet" there is only an endless vacancy that mirrors his own, and the speaker finds no markers by which to identify a tenable position in the world:

>   the field hooked
> endless
> under this sky, is a mirror running;
> the absence it gives pinpoints and dazes me.
> (31)

"The White Magnet" is also one of Marc Plourde's more violent poems—winter's "perfect burn," "the snow blade," "the field hooked," legs like "stakes"—and it forces the speaker into an uncharacteristic moment of self-expression: "I may break soon." The poem ends with memories of warm horses and moves toward a final personification of distance as a violent animal—distance as a kind of hunter—a reminder to keep moving until some other has been reached.

One such other is found in "Gardening at the Dead-End of Howard Street," a poem whose harsh landscape is cultivated by the efforts of an immigrant:

> Lifeless this earth breeds only broken
> pieces of glass, tin cans, dust
> across its surface…
> (*T* 30)

The landscapes of both this poem and "The White Magnet" share the quality of lifelessness, but whereas the speaker of "The White Magnet" looks to the sky for an identity marker, an act that only reinforces his unrootedness, the immigrant delves into the soil, and it is through the energy of pounding and raking and piling that both he and the speaker achieve a final calm:

> he gathers scrap wood for stakes, pounds
> them in with a rock, rakes the dry soil
> finally heaps the rubbish
> in a pile and sets a flame to it, and rests.
> (30)

The theme of cultivation that pervades this poem is not only dependent on the immigrant's work in the garden, but on the speaker's capacity to revel in the subject's exuberant toil as though it were his own. There is a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment that Plourde's speaker only finds when describing other subjects; if poetry is Plourde's gesture toward the other (whether a girl, an immigrant, or children walking through a gate), then translation becomes the culmination of that gesture.

Plourde extends his aesthetic of engaged emptiness—of sublimating the self in favour of someone that is outside—into an ideal of translation: "Any originality that appears in his work [the translator's] must seem to be an expression of the author's personality and talent, not his own. [. . .] The translator cannot live in the author's skin, but his work must create the illusion that he does" (Plourde 113). Translation was a suitable creative pursuit for this young writer Hugh Hood described as leaping "from style to style like an Alpine chamois from crag to crag, rehearsing the history of the modern movement in poetic diction in his own person, taking a month over it" (*TWM* 4). Plourde's flexibility and stylistic rehearsal will become invaluable as he moves on to translating the distinct and politically charged voice of Gaston Miron. As Sherry Simon observes, the act of translating a new generation of distinctly Québécois writers posed tremendous difficulty for anglophone translators, many of whom described a "willful resistance to translation that is embedded in the writing of this powerfully nationalist period" (Simon 36). Hood concludes in his introduction to *The White Magnet* that Marc Plourde "will never stop being a lyric poet, but he is going to be other men" (8). More so than other translators, Plourde succeeds in becoming Gaston Miron. In the afterword to Miron's *Embers and Earth* Plourde goes on for ten pages about the specifics of translation—telling us about his phone calls to Miron, his need to read everything Miron ever wrote (and everyone that ever translated him), his requests to have Miron read the poems aloud and explain specific connotations of words. This attention to detail stands in contrast to D.G. Jones, co-translator of the book, whose approach to translation is far more liberal. Plourde recalls Jones remarking that some critics didn't believe that his (Jones's) translations were translations at all: "Some critics had seen it more as an original poem by Jones than a translation of Miron" (*EE* 113). The turn toward translation seems inevitable for a writer who was so very good at invoking the world around him, and yet never quite able to step into the world himself.

The poems that make up Gaston Miron's *La vie agonique* are committed to seeking out and mobilizing a nationalist consciousness. Jocelyn Maclure describes Miron as one of the key pre-Quiet Revolution "melancholic nationalists" (34) who sought to identify the truncated nature of Québécois communal identity in the experience of colonization. The task of such melancholic nationalists was not only to identify a colonized condition, but also "to *name*, with force and eloquence, a sensibility, a way of living and of feeling "Québecness" (Maclure 37). Whereas John Glassco views nationalism as a limitation to Québécois poetry (to poetry in general)—"it is a truism that politics and nationalism have somehow never managed to make really good poetry" (xix)—Miron asserts its inescapability: "Today I know that poetry cannot be anything but national" (109). This clearly poses a challenge to a poet like Plourde who has demonstrated no political sentiments (in fact demonstrated few explicit sentiments at all) in his poetry. In "Héritage de la tristesse," for example, Miron describes the unformed consciousness of his nation:

> Il est triste et pêle-mêle dans les étoiles tombées
> livide, muet, nulle part et effaré, vaste fantôme
> il est ce pays seul avec lui-même et neiges et rocs
> un pays que jamais ne rejoint le soleil natal
> en lui beau corps s'enfouit un sommeil désaltérant

pareil à l'eau dans la soif vacante des graviers.
(Miron 18)

The momentum of the poem is relentless—a combination of poetic rhyme and rhythm mixed with near raving intensity (one reads it as something between religious chant and political speech). The incantatory quality created by the internal rhyme (the repetition of *é/eil* sounds) would be difficult to reproduce in English, as is evident in Fred Cogswell's translation:

Sad and confused among the fallen stars
pale, silent, nowhere and afraid, a vast phantom
here is this land alone with winds and rocks
a land forever lost to its natal sun
a beautiful body drowned in mindless sleep
like water lost in a barren thirst of gravel.
(Cogswell 64)

Plourde's translation attempts to reproduce the momentum by stressing and repeating *s* sounds throughout the first stanza:

Sad and scattered among the fallen stars
you are an immense phantom, livid, silent, nowhere
and frightened, a country alone in rocks and snow
a country that never joins with its native sun
in your beautiful body sleep buries itself, sleep
that is like water in gravel's vacant thirst.
(Plourde 19)

Plourde's version does a better job of conveying the high emotional pitch of Miron's speaker's voice. The decision to repeat the word "sleep" seems particularly apt, though the original line does not explicitly call for it. Miron often repeats words in his lines, and Plourde exploits this quite effectively (here and in other instances) to create a rhythm and voice more in keeping with the source. The next thing to notice about the two translations is Cogswell's softening of the political/nationalist tone by translating "pays" as "land" rather than "country." In contrast, Plourde actually seems to intensify this tone by choosing "native" over "natal." The primary connotations of both "land" and "natal" are not explicitly political, whereas the primary connotations of "country" and "native" most certainly are. Finally, one is struck by Plourde's decision to change the poem from the third to the second person. This gives the relationship between the speaker and his "pays" a level of immediacy and intimacy that the original seems to resist. The third person perspective heightens the sense of distance and alienation, though perhaps Plourde felt that the English version was making too many emotional sacrifices (in general the language reads more stiff. A perspective shift is an extreme liberty to take, but again it serves to intensify the emotional nationalist pitch of the poem. Rather than speaking about land in the third person, the speaker is desperately addressing his country's broken spirit, imploring it to rise up and hold him:

> les vents qui changez les sorts de place la nuit
> vents de rendez-vous, vents aux prunelles solaires
> vents telluriques, vents de l'âme, vents universels
> vents ameutez-nous, et de vos bras de fleuve ensemble
> enserrez son visage de peuple abîmé, redonnez-lui
> la chaleur
>
> et la profuse lumière des sillages d'hirondelles.
> (Miron 20)

> winds that shuffle the lots of precedence by night
> winds of concourse, winds with solar eyes
> telluric winds, winds of the soul, universal winds
> come couple, o winds, and with your river arms
> embrace this face of a ruined people, give it
> the warmth
>
> and the abundant light that rings the wake of swallows.
> (Cogswell 64)

> O winds shifting fates by night, winds
> now meeting, winds with solar
> eyes shooting round the earth and the soul
> universal winds rise together, hold with your river
> arms the face of a hollowed people, give us
> warmth again
> and light, let swallows pass in a sudden wake of light.
> (Plourde 21)

Plourde's version again seems more nimble, though he also takes more chances (the third line especially stands out). The perspective shift continues to draw attention, though it makes more sense as one compares the different versions in their entirety. When reading the original French there is somehow never any doubt that the speaker is addressing a subject

(Québec) he is very close to. He is part of this land and one of these people, and his provisional distance from them is a consequence of the truncated national condition the poem describes. In a stiffly composed English version (where the speaker's emotional relationship to his subject isn't overwhelmingly clear) this sense of provisional distance risks being interpreted simply as distance. The francophone speaker does not address his country because he cannot, whereas Cogswell's anglophone speaker describes a land and its people and one isn't exactly sure why or from what position.

For Plourde and Miron the geography of locality is the same. Many of Miron's references are regionally specific, and their recognition in translation therefore depends not on surmounting territorial or temporal distance, but on surmounting a cultural and political divide. In general anglophone and francophone communities here navigate the same street corners and live among the same monuments, mountains, and types of trees. The translator in this case need not transport us to a distant geographical land, but rather adjust our vision to the same land. As a result the translator's task becomes at once simpler and more complicated. Many of the symbolic references Miron uses—street names and regional fauna, for example—are, on the surface, identical in English translation. But the inner life of these same references is so different—they are culturally and historically coded in such various ways—that the translator is faced with the daunting task not only of transporting the meaning of a French word into an English one, but also of radically transforming the connotation of what often seems like the same word—the meaning of "pays/country" for example.

The politics of a poem are as much in the grammar and punctuation as in the content. To better understand what Miron's voice might (or should) sound like in English it may be worthwhile to think of Dennis Lee's *Civil Elegies*. In both cases a defeated speaker laments the bankruptcy of his national culture while still passionately imploring its spirit (and the spirit of all its citizens) to rise up and assert itself. The final stanza of *Civil Elegies* offers a similar conclusion to the problem of national assertion as the final stanza of "Héritage de la tristesse" (quoted above):

> Earth, you nearest, allow me.
> Green of the earth and civil grey:
> within me, without me and moment by
> moment allow me for to
> be here is enough and earth you
> strangest, you nearest, be home.
> (Lee 51)

In both final stanzas a new natural element is introduced and addressed—wind and earth respectively—in an attempt to find in nature an underlying spirit of civic community. The comma is the dominant mark of punctuation in both *La vie agonique* and *Civil Elegies*—in both cases creating a sense of breathlessness, of insecurity, of wanting desperately to articulate a national condition, and yet not quite having the words (the historical models) to effectively do so. The second stanza of section four of Lee's poem begins with "If only it held" (37). The following sentence, in which the speaker attempts to articulate what "it" is, and why it need hold together, uses 195 words in 23 lines (without a single period), clauses piled one upon the other like a train wreck. Miron's "la braise et l'humus" (17 lines without a period) makes similar use of repetition and the comma to convey a desperation. In "The Task of the Translator" Walter Benjamin identifies syntax as the key to effective translation: "A real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original all the more fully. This may be achieved, above all, by a literal rendering of the syntax which proves words rather than sentences to be the primary element of the translator" (260). The power of Miron's poetry is its momentum, its tormented yet unyielding desire to articulate a people and a place. Plourde faithfully adheres to Miron's resistance to full stops and long pauses of any kind, and he accentuates the relentless motion of the original by successfully using techniques of repetition and alliteration in ways that many others do not. The key to being a good translator, Plourde suggests, is the intent to understand the source thoroughly and methodically:

> My belief is that a translation can only be as good as the translator's understanding of the original text. A superficial reading produces a superficial and mediocre translation. [. . .] What I needed was a more profound and comprehensive understanding of Miron's poetry and the network of ideas, influences, views and values behind it. [. . .] I began reading the existing translations of Miron (particularly those by Jones, Glassco and Cogswell) carefully in order to appreciate their virtues and failings. I read the author's prose articles (and later translated some of them) as well as interviews that had appeared in periodicals. I telephoned Gaston Miron and he agreed to try to answer any questions I might have about his poems (I didn't mention the number of questions I had in mind for fear of scaring him away). (*EE* 115)

This level of dedication is a gesture of authorial selflessness that we have already observed at work in Plourde's own poetry, a gesture that seeks meaning in the faithful depiction of the other, and which allows his translation to convey the momentum and emotional immediacy of Miron's voice more effectively than other attempts.

Marc Plourde's poetry is not overtly musical; it does not sound like a song. But nor does it suffer from "'poetic' phrasing trying to disguise as music what is really an artificial act of verbal creativity" (Starnino 237). There is nothing artificial or stiff about Plourde's poetry, nor his translations. Both are fully committed to engaging and depicting other subjectivities (whether they be characters in his own poems, or the poets he translates). Anglo-Quebec poetry is often characterized by self-assertion and verbal exuberance (and often rooted in the politics of minority), but Marc Plourde's poetry and translations remind us that there is also poetic energy in self-effacement, in stripping away layers of individuality to accentuate the acts of gesture and embrace. In the 1970s, a generation of Anglo-Quebec poets managed to assert and identify themselves and, by extension, to open a horizon of poetic spaces for future Anglo-Quebec poets to inhabit. Marc Plourde's subtle poetic career offers the Anglo-Quebec poetry community a counterpoint to the fully-formed, often boisterous lyric speakers that fill many of our anthologies; the poetry is bare, honest, and its recurrent willingness to sacrifice the self in favour of contact with the other culminates in the most powerful translations of Gaston Miron that we have.

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