Coming to Terms with the Mother Tongue

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S'approprier pleinement sa langue maternelle

Dôre Michelut commence par décrire ce qui arrive aux dialectes paysans lors de l'immigration dans une langue / culture différente puis analyse la relation existant entre les deux langues qu'elle a acquises, l'anglais et l'italien, et sa langue maternelle du Frioul. Après avoir immigré au Canada, puis s'être plongée dans l'italien à Florence pour ensuite en anglais au Canada de nouveau, elle a trouvé que chacune de ses langues occupe des zones distinctes de sa conscience, de son identité même, et que la traduction semble impliquer la trahison d'un monde par l'autre. Toutefois, lorsqu'elle a commencé à écrire de la poésie dans toutes ses langues à la fois, elle a trouvé que, malgré les grammaires différentes, les poèmes se séparaient pour se compléter dans leur langue différente. Lorsqu'elle traduit d'une langue à l'autre, celles-ci deviennent des sujets capables de revendiquer ou de contester son expérience. L'anglais avec son vague et délibéré 'it,' l'italien avec ses inévitables verbes réflexifs et le furlan avec sa revendication de son moi préconçu agissent aussi activement lors du 'tamisage' de la traduction par l'auteure qui permet à chaque langue, bien que s'addressant à elle différemment, de lui parler plus pleinement, même lorsqu'elle les modèle selon ses besoins.

Many writers today are first or second-generation immigrants who live and work in another language, one of Canada's two official languages. Although their mother tongue may still occupy a part of their lives, this part has been relegated to a circumscribed private territory which does not enter easily into relation with either living or writing in the acquired dominant language. For a writer, the problems and paradoxes this poses come constantly to the fore and are so complex that any attempt to use the mother tongue as a vehicle for writing is quickly abandoned. To understand the scope of the problem in the life

of an individual writer, it is informative to consider what happens to a language upon immigration.

Most North American immigration up to 1960 was of peasant stock due to an industrialization which progressively developed a modern economy by erasing indigenous feudal cultures and enlarging the middle classes. Writers who are children of this wave of immigration and who would work in their mother tongue find themselves writing within a sensibility that is pregnant with feeling and presence, yet speechless.

Peasant speech occupies a place in a cultural hierarchy: its task is the cultivation of soil and the taming of animals. To do this requires physical presence and sound. Being oral, its standards are upheld by cyclical rituals that involve the earth and the speaking self rather than the thinking self and a body of written law. As language, it is not amenable to forms of communication which occur in a society whose allegiance is to a stable corpus of standardized signs rather than to the signs of the earth in seasonal change. The sensibility of language that develops within a scripted tradition is missing.

Between the acquired language and the mother tongue, how can there be common ground? The two languages have long since staked out their territory within the psyche and the balance that has been achieved is seamless and invisible. For writers who would explore that boundary, there is no recourse but to approach both languages in their oral states as reservoirs. But soon the mother tongue would hold the writer in an earth it can no longer cultivate, and the acquired language would become more abstract to accommodate that 'unreal' experience. The relations between reservoirs soon become saturated and static: experience in one is felt as a threat by the other. The mother tongue, judged by the requirements of the activity of writing, turns into a barren, moon-like landscape explored by forms proper to the acquired language. The result is inaccessible both to the acquired language and to the original language that evolved in the homeland.

Yet, if I were to look at the phenomenon which touches me intimately solely from a social perspective, as if my languages were objects to manipulate in view of a written goal, I would be forgetting that at some point in time I gave myself to language and that I have entrusted language with my life. I would be calling my experience in language a body separate from myself and I would be saying that the object has grown alien. If I were to stop at this, not only would I end up

abandoning Furlan, my mother tongue, I would also be stating that the sounds I made in Friûl until I was six stayed there when I left, that Furlan belongs to a place outside of me. But those first six years of my life can't be separated from me. They spread through my time like my child body spreads through my adult body. And how many of those six years that run through me are unspoken or abandoned because I can't find their forms in English?

Furlan, my mother tongue, is a marriage between Celtic and vulgar Latin and is a member of the eighth Romance language group, Ladino. It is spoken in a small province of northern Italy and its dialects vary from town to town due to millenia of invasions and very localized life. Although it is a language, it developed a standardized script only recently.

But most of what I have learned about myself and language through writing did not develop because of a rediscovery of Furlan. The balance that Furlan and English struck within me long ago is so very entrenched it feels saturated and inaccessible. At a certain point, my two acquired languages, Italian and English, were forced to come to terms with each other within me. It was this experience that led me to consider ways of approaching the more remote Furlan. When my family emigrated to Canada, my parents decided that Furlan was such a minority language that it would not be of use to their children in the future. Therefore, in our house, our parents spoke Furlan amongst themselves and they spoke what Italian they knew with the children. It took only a few years for me to reply to both languages exclusively in English. In my teens, I could understand both Italian and Furlan, but I spoke them badly.

To complicate matters further, after high school I decided to go to university in Florence where the Italian seemed to be another language altogether. A background noise became the foreground. After one year I spoke Italian not badly; after two I spoke it well; after five I started having problems with English. When I came back to live in Toronto after having been absent for eight years, it seemed I spoke English just as everyone spoke English but as soon as a serious conversation got underway, words flew by each other and did not meet. Cultural references I made became irrelevant, concepts that struck sure resonance in Florence, wafted and waned in Toronto, or were too loud, too soft, abstract, or even impolite. I found myself starting to wobble, unable to detect whether I had hit or missed 'something.'

I suspected that my English had become insufficient so I went back to university in Toronto searching specifically for courses similar to those I had taken in Italy. Immediately, I became aware that the information I was absorbing was already in me but arranged differently. Concepts that flowed together inevitably in Italy, here stood independently, senselessly. It was as if the languages had been amazingly attracted and yet unable to touch and penetrate. As if *aemulateo*, Foucault's second form of similitude, where recognition perpetuates space without contact, were struggling to become *convenentia*, adjacency of place, where fringes touch and mingle. Feeling their exclusiveness, I could commit myself fully to neither. Translation seemed a puny effort in such a struggle; something always seemed betrayed, and I avoided it.

At first I lived the impossibility of translation as silence. In fact, I became aware of the exclusion of myself from one world and the other to such an extent that I started feeling irrelevant to both. The more attention I gave to the English world here, the less I understood the intense and committed life I had lived for eight years in Florence, and the more it haunted me. Then I started to write, in any language and despite all grammars. It would have been unintelligible to most, but as far as I was concerned, I was producing meaning, and on my own terms. And the view I got of myself from the page was that of two different sets of cards shuffled together, each deck playing its own game with its own rules.

Perhaps because the page is white and gives the illusion of being outside the human body and therefore only mildly related to it through language, I realized that the act of speaking is also the act of being spoken. I saw myself shaping language, but I also saw how the page shaped me. Where a language claimed me, the speaker, it claimed not only what I uttered but also dictated the parameters of what I could possibly utter in given circumstances. At this point, I finally started to understand my relationship to language: it premeditated me and I, to the extent that I allowed it to carry me, determined it.

The so-called betrayal of translation was really irrelevant; all form, including sound as language, betrayed for that matter. The point was to fully determine myself in a given circumstance: I could never change the given, but I could shape it as I engaged it. My fear of betrayal was, in fact, my fear of freedom to choose between forms. It had to be either one or the other at a given point in time; simultaneity

was impossible. Like the old profile-vase perception exercise, English just could not assimilate my experience of Italian. It made external, stereotypical conjectures, but it could not incorporate the other sensibility as part of its own manifest reality. What was lived in Italian stayed in Italian, belonged to it completely. And vice versa.

I found that I had no choice but to commit myself fully. Unless I offered my statement wholeheartedly to a language's undertow of ironies, to its inner 'ear,' the meaning was not 'felt' and what was manifest in the statement lost sense and sensibility. Since I seemed to be possessed by the language I experienced, the experience had to reside not in me but in the 'ear' of the language itself. In theory, this sounds practical; in practice, as I materialized one ghost, the other would fade. I hated the seeming arbitrary blindness of the two languages. Each left me out while stumbling all over the other invisible entity that occupied the same territory – me. Finally, I thought that if the languages could only 'see' each other within me, I would stop feeling haunted and cheated.

Writing, I tracked the sighting of one ghost or the other. The more I wrote, the more I found myself grammatically separating the languages. One poem would become two: one in either language. I would work on them until they seemed to snap apart and become independent entities; each becoming progressively more untranslateable as it progressed in its own direction. What surprised, and then delighted was that each poem came to a stop somewhere inside itself when it knew itself as coherent, whole and complete. At this point, each piece could recognize the other and know its conception from the moment it diverged. It could 'see' where the other broke off and how far it continued into itself toward its own satisfaction. Together, both constituted the whole bracket that was the extent of my experience of that poem. Nothing was left out; all the words were ghostless, full of me and present to themselves.

It was then that I understood that translation incorporates the idea of the insufficiency of the object produced while being intimately involved in and committed to its production. Mine was a process of self-translation: I spanned the languages within my awareness simultaneously while each experienced the other in a 'felt' relation. I was generating a dialectical experience that was relative to both languages, and yet, at the same time, I was beyond them both. The event could therefore be remembered and explained. By translating myself

into myself, by spinning a fine line in-between states of reality, I transcended the paralysis of being either inside or outside form. It was like transmuting lead to gold and back, solely for the pleasure of knitting their interrelation. I understood that the standardized language mattered only inasmuch as I could experience its translation in writing. Grammar was not written in stone, it was writing in me, and I was the only arbiter of the experience. Since I was both the author and the translator, who else could I consult?

At this point I found I had something to say about the forms of these languages in a way that did not exclude my intimacy with them. My writing was a tool with which I held them so that they would produce me while I communicated within them. I could finally speak of English and Italian not as objects, but as subjects with individual personalities which acted upon me.

English and Italian agree and disagree in interesting places. Anyone who has translated has certainly localized these common linguistic *impassi*. Take the English neuter 'it,' for instance, Hemingway's 'it': a genderless, nameless identity. It is raining; it goes without saying; how is it going? In Italian: *piove; si capisce; come va?* Where in English the vagueness of 'it,' although undetermined, must be acknowledged for the sentence to make grammatical sense, in Italian naming the 'it' is superfluous and tautological. *Esso va bene* is indeed redundant because the use of 'it' is determined by the degree of specificity which governs 'its' position in regard to the verb. For example, after deciding whether the 'it' is masculine or feminine (*lo, la*), Italian then considers whether the object is specific enough to be added to the verb, as is *lo* in the phrase *devi vederlo*, or emphatic enough to act as a subject: *lo devi vedere*. But at this point, if the subject is too universal, the *lo* disappears and is absorbed, as in the verb *piove*. In Italian, only conceivability and therefore specificity allows an object the possibility of independent grammatical action. One can imagine how this world-view limits the influence of the object upon the speaking subject.

English, however, insists on containing the unmentionable in a form which functions to keep the 'it' separate from the verb. English has a hard time living with what is not comprehensible and vague and must keeping pointing 'it' out whenever possible: a counter-spell to keep away the indeterminate spirit of 'it is a nice day,' or perhaps an attempt to expand 'it' into liveable, human space. But by doing this English grants independence to 'it,' an invisible subject, and that inde-

pendence is tangible since we can say that the 'it' which is a nice day is not necessarily just a nice day.

In Italian, this does not occur. In fact, since Italian does not have a concept for the English 'it,' it hears two 'days' in one sentence, one as subject and the other as object, and it comes away from the encounter feeling that English obtusely insists on being redundant. From the English point of view, Italian is full of contorted constructions simply because it must find a multitude of ways to get around the naming of 'it.'

But Italian also has its peculiarities. Those who have tried to translate English into Italian must have met up with the supreme frustration of not being able to do without the reflexive where one doesn't want it. Let me clarify with a line from one of my poems: 'And I imagine your hair holding the wind and curling.' It is impossible to translate this line into Italian without the reflexive. *E mi immagino i tuoi capelli che si arricciano per stringere il vento.* To the English ear, *me immagino, si arricciano* imply intentionality of the I and of the hair. In English, there is no reason for the hair to be aware of itself holding or the I to imagine itself imagining. 'It' just happens. *Succede.*

Perhaps Italian cannot grammatically contain the unnameable because it does not dare to take the phenomenological god in vain, preferring a grand variety of blasphemy instead. As for English, sexual reference in swearing accounts for most linguistic transgression. This is interesting in view of the fact that this very world-view has stripped the phenomenal world of gender.

I hope and remember, but I want to live the present and write the present. I feel uneasy with language always going only part of the way. I want to speak myself. Yet in English, I say that the line of the poem I have translated is not acceptable: it violates the original voice. In Italian, I insist that if what I say is to be meaningful, action cannot be contemplated unless an actor intends it. And that's that.

But how far back must I travel to be present in Furlan, my mother tongue? I spoke it until I was six, and have spoken it sporadically since. My knowledge of it is limited and my experience knows more about the cultivation of culture than it does about the cultivation of the earth. Not having territorial cues to bring memory into focus, the life I have lived in that language is remote and, for the most part, forgotten. There seems to be nothing to say. The claims of Italian and English were conceptual and therefore easier to locate, but Furlan and English

have been keeping an agreement struck so long ago that they take their co-habitation for granted to the point that I don't know where each would claim or contest my experience. Since Furlan is my mother tongue, I know that what Furlan would claim would be outrageous, it would want to be the entire universe, and with no vocabulary to boot. To give myself to its unspoken presence, to its ironies, to its 'ear,' feels like drowning. But I do know that when I speak Furlan, badly as I speak it, it feels 'like me' as nothing I can ever say in English or Italian feels 'like me.'

It might be fruitful to explain the person I become in these languages in terms of what I can imagine within them. For example, in Furlan, the thought that beyond highway 11 in Ontario there are no other roads going north, only a vast expanse of forest wilderness, makes me panic. I cannot enter into relation with this threatening emptiness unless I think of hewing out a plot of land, building solid shelter and planting a garden for food. I would worry about how to get seeds and nails. Perhaps when things become stable I would tame a wild creature, a bear comes to mind. If I approach the same territory in English, I do not worry about food and shelter, somehow they are granted to me and do not cause anxiety. I would perhaps learn to fly so I could enter into some kind of relation with the immensity before me. It would not occur to me to tame animals, I would rather observe them in their natural state and learn small things about myself through watching them.

Rendering that Furlan which feels 'like me' in English is a huge problem. Most of my life I have brought Furlan to English and never assumed that my mother tongue could ask questions of English. But since self-translation required a reciprocal flow, I brought English to Furlan. The first time I inverted the process, I felt the odd and frightening sensation that my mother finally understood everything I was saying. As I translated, I felt the English rushing toward Furlan, being pulled in like a lover and shaped. They had been blind to each other because the alternate reciprocal experience had been missing. As I translated, the English text started to change. There were some words I could use and others I couldn't. Furlan just wouldn't accept certain concepts or sensibilities. I've learned to trust it and bend English to suit its needs. And the English that developed, informed by the Furlan, began to sound more and more 'like me.'

My goal is not to recover specific memories of my remote child-

hood, although they tend to materialize unexpectedly, nor is it the manipulation of the formal possibilities of Furlan – this happens incidentally. Rather, my goal is to provide a bridge in which English can happen in the light of Furlan and, when possible, vice versa.

There are areas within each of us that have never met, that don't speak or listen to each other. If these areas are enclosed in languages, those of us who still have an active mother tongue have an interesting and definite area to cultivate, one that we can experience and reshape through translation. Because writing holds words in time, it is possible to return and 'tame' their meaning. It is possible to form and repeat those parts of ourselves which are repeatable in order to begin to recognize the sound of the self forming as different world views meet to negotiate experience. I find that when a poem or a story has passed through the sieve, gone from English to Furlan and back, from Furlan to Italian or Italian to English and back, each language still speaks me differently, because it must, but each speaks me more fully.