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The Poetry of French Canada in Translation

INTRODUCTION

Anthologies of translations lie under handicaps from which other collections are free. Above all they are subject to inevitable gaps and a corresponding want of proportion and balance in their survey of the field. there is no remedy for this: the anthologist has only the choice of what is available–and the choice is made still harder in the case of translations of poetry, where minor poems have often been excellently rendered and major ones either skipped or spoiled. This is especially true of the poetry of French Canada where translation, while often inspired, has always been capricious and sporadic.

Any formal review of French-Canadian poetry itself would be thus out of place here; moreover, this has already been so well done, in French by Guy Sylvestre in his *Anthologie de la Poésie Canadienne-française* and by Gilles Marcotte in *Une littérature qui se fait*, and in English by A. J. M. Smith in his introduction to *The Oxford Book of Canadian Verse*–to say nothing of the valuable studies of Gérard Bessette and Gérard Tougas–that the reader need only be referred to them. The present anthology can do no more than give the English reader his first extended view of the beauties, development and direction of the poetry itself.

This view will reveal both its limitation and its excellencies. It will be seen that the poetry of French Canada is a poetry of exile–from France and North America alike–and that the note of desertion, of nostalgia, of the *dépaysé*, recurs constantly, forming a kind of ground-bass to themes of avoidance, retreat and escape. This feeling of abandonment, first by France and then by a native élite, is only too well founded in historical fact; and the poets of French Canada–who rather than her religious and political leaders have always been the true spokesmen of her reality–have expressed with varying degrees of intensity the spirit of a people whose pride and conservatism, religiosity and restlessness, sentimentality and neurosis, have united and interwoven to form the defensive armour generally assumed by people whose normal evolution has been checked and stifled for any length of time. For the Conquest was the first and supreme experience of French Canada, and its perpetuation in various forms of control and isolation, no matter who or by whom imposed, has given a

certain uniformity to her literary attitudes. The three constant sources of poetic inspiration have thus continued to be Nature, the Self and Death; the passions of love and liberty play almost no part in it, for women, as Jean Le Moyne has pointed out, are considered exclusively as mothers, and liberty is conceived not as individual freedom but always as a transference of power from an English to a French ruling class.

It will be noted, however, that within these limits French-Canadian poets have accomplished marvels of form, insight, music and grace. The work of Nelligan, Morin, Choquette, Grandbois, Saint-Denys-Garneau, Rina Lasnier and Anne Hébert is of the first, or almost the first, order of poetry; but the measure of its worth is in its transcendence of the historical situation, of that French fact which, however fundamental to the life of the people itself, was nonetheless something that these poets assimilated and surmounted: the single-minded passion by which they did so is the measure, indeed, of their poetic stature. It is still too early to assess the corresponding stature of their successors of the present day, though it is safe to say that '*le créateur, le poète, qui donnera au peuple canadien-français son image*', the genius so hopefully announced and awaited by Saint-Denys-Garneau in his *Journal*, has not yet appeared. Brilliant, eloquent, impassioned and exploiting all the resources of new and exciting techniques, they seem too often preoccupied by political and national ideas, by the one incandescent ideal of a beleaguered Quebec–and it is a truism that politics and nationalism have somehow never managed to make really good poetry. Also, the dead hand of surrealism–an influence no less pernicious than any other worn-out poetic method–is still hovering over them, with its obsession with the magic of dissociated images, its facile surprises, its meaningless sonorities. Nevertheless, the greater part of this anthology has been allotted to the younger poets; for the renaissance begun by the *parti pris* and Hexagone groups is in fact, as Alain Bosquet has pointed out, the only significant development of French-Canadian poetry since it emerged from the prison of the self-regarding self under the leadership of seminal poets like Grandbois, Hertel and Hénault. The voices of this renaissance, which are the collective voice of the future of French Canada, are what is important and what must be heard, even in the unequal and opaque medium of translation.

INTRODUCTION

The translation of poetry is often decried. It has become fashionable to repeat Robert Frost's remark that what gets lost in the process is 'the poetry itself'–or, as Sir John Denham put it rather less succinctly 300 years earlier, 'the subtile Spirit of poesie evaporates entirely in the transfusion from one language to another,' though he adds the saving qualification, 'unless a new, or an original spirit is infused by the Translator himself.' This infusion remains the mark of good translation; and difficult as it is, the operation must always be ruled by the architecture of the poem itself, which is necessarily laid bare. Faithful translation especially, which can seldom hope–and in the opinion of some should never try–to reproduce the music or magic of the original, is in fact the strictest examination a poem's intimate structure can undergo, an ultimate screening that may leave it nothing but its intellectual content or 'meaning', its images and inner pulsation; for Mallarmé's clever riposte to Degas is only half true: poetry *is* made out of words, but poems themselves–as Mallarmé must have known–do not *begin* with words but with ideas, concepts, formulations of emotion. The scales of translation are thus weighted in favour of a poetry marked by clarity of thought and expression, spare and striking imagery, and a simple internal movement: the work of Virgil, Dante, Villon and Baudelaire, for example, lends itself admirably to versions in other tongues, while that of Catullus, Tasso, Hugo and Verlaine does not. Rimbaud's richly allusive prose-poems are almost unreadable in translation, though his sonnets and 'ballads', owing to their comparative simplicity, come through quite well.

But it is not only the ideas and progression of a poem that are exposed by translation: the temper and complexion of the poet himself are so mercilessly revealed as to justify the wry old equation of *traduttore, traditore*. This betrayal, which is part of the translator's enforced role of analytical critic, is everywhere apparent in the present anthology. The fustian of Crémazie, the smugness of the poets of the *Terroir*, the rhetoric of much of the *jeune poésie*–all these are indeed *traditi*, as they were bound to be. For the good translator is obliged, whether he likes it or not, either to take the line laid down by Lord Roscommon in that ingenuous couplet,

Your author always will be best advise;
Fall when he falls, and when he rises rise,

or to yield to the temptation to beautify and 'improve', and thus perhaps carry the process of betrayal still further.

Why then, it may be asked, make translations of poetry at all? If the result is a loss, a depreciation, a betrayal, surely the expense of effort, the dizzying labour of trying to transmute the essence of that most incommensurable thing, a poem, might be better applied elsewhere–even in following Ezra Pound's advice to 'make it new', that is, to misread the text in a fit of inspired illiteracy and make another poem altogether. But is not this question only another way of asking why poetry itself should be written? The poet, as Saint-Denys-Garneau found, is aware sooner or later that in pursuing his vocation he is exposing, depreciating and betraying himself, and finally failing to express the reality of his experience; but this does not stop him from writing poetry. In the same way the devoted translator of poetry will not be balked: he is possessed by the necessity of making a *translation*–in the older, religious sense of a conveyance or assumption, as of Enoch or Elijah–of the vision of reality he has received from a poem, and of communicating his experience to those of another tongue; and when he wholly succeeds, as he sometimes does, the sense of achievement is that of poetic creation itself. At the worst, he has made a bridge of sorts.

The history of serious translation of French-Canadian poetry is short, covering little more than a dozen years and comprising only the collections of Jean Beaupré and Geal Turnbull (1955), P. F. Widdows (1960), F. R. Scott (1964) and Peter Miller (1964), although isolated groups of poems have appeared from time to time in books, newspapers and the little magazines; and almost all the poets represented in these collections date from within the last twenty-five years. Of translations done before 1950 there is little worth preserving except for antiquarian reasons, and going back further, one has only to read the translations done around the turn of the century, with their faded prettiness, poetic diction and Victorian tinkle, to appreciate the treatment that the poetry of French Canada has received within the last ten years.

The leading figure in this field so recently opened up is undoubtedly F. R. Scott, whose early renderings of Garneau, Hébert, Hénault, Trottier, Pilon and Giguère are still

outstanding. His taste, fidelity and grasp of the movement of each poem are always admirable, and his versions could serve as models; he is Canada's first artistic translator of poetry. The joint work of Beaupré and Turnbull–whose little mimeographed pamphlets, produced in Iroquois Falls in 1955-6, are now collectors' items–has a place of honour as the first example of collective poetry translation in this country, while Widdows and Miller, in their selections from the work of Émile Nelligan and Alain Grandbois respectively, gave English readers at least a glimpse of two of the most important poets of French Canada. Since then the translation of French-Canadian poetry has been immeasurably enriched by the work of such English-Canadian poets as Fred Cogswell, John Robert Colombo, G. V. Downes, Louis Dudek, R. A. D. Ford, Eldon Grier, Ralph Gustafson, George Johnston, Jay Macpherson, James Reaney, A. J. M. Smith and Francis Sparshott.

The present anthology was not, however, made from book or periodical printings alone, though these sources have all been consulted and drawn upon. More than three-quarters of the translations in this book have never been published before, and such a high proportion of new work may be taken as a hopeful sign for the future.

The leading principle of selection has been the viability of the translation itself. Thus, the space occupied by any poet has little relation to his importance vis-à-vis any other; for instance, Paul Morin has almost twice the space given to his contemporary René Chopin–but only because the latter, while quite a good poet and only slightly more difficult to render, has somehow had less attraction to translators; the same circumstance accounts for the insufficient representation of the work of Suzanne Paradis and Jacques Brault, and for the no less regrettable omission of Cécile Chabot, Clément Marchand, Alphonse Piché, Gérard Bessette and J.-P. Filion: *non omnia possumus etiam omnes*. Versions of important poems that by reason of their intractability have failed to make good poetry in English have generally been excluded; on the other hand fine re-creations of less representative poems have been regarded as their own warrant; so that, in a sense, this is an anthology of poetic translations rather than of translations of poetry. The possibly undue space given to Crémazie, Fréchette and a few earlier poets should be regarded mainly as an acknowledgment of their historical importance.

The original poems have not been printed. It was felt that the traditional juxtaposition of original and translation not only hinders the enjoyment of the translation as a poem in itself, but tends to turn the original into a study-text, the translation into a crib, and the essential poetry of both into a lesson in language or an occasion to compare techniques. The translations in this collection are presented as things that must stand on their own, dependent on their own poetic merits, owing to their originals nothing but the inspiration that has here found a partial rebirth.

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