

TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

I WAS FIRST INTRODUCED to the work of Madeleine Gagnon and other French-language women writers in a course on 'la littérature au féminin' ('writing in the feminine') at Concordia University. I felt an immediate affinity with these writings, and a fascination with their innovation in language and forms of writing. They opened my eyes to different ways of seeing women, men and how the world works. They struck chords in my heart I never knew were there.

As an undergraduate student of translation, I naturally mused on the possibility of attempting to render this writing into English. But even if I were to decide to try my hand at literary translation, I wondered if it was my place, as a man, to try to translate writing based so much on the subversion of traditional masculine discourse and on the expression and validation of women's experience. However, when it was proposed that I join three women classmates in translating feminist writers collectively, I accepted the invitation with enthusiasm. We embarked on the translation of Louky Bersianik's pivotal work *L'Eugélonne*¹ and received permission to do a collective MA thesis on the translation and theoretical problems encountered in the work. For various reasons the three women dropped out of the project, but I continued on my own, and I found myself alone as the first graduate student in women's studies at Concordia University.² Later when Mair Verthuy, who had directed my thesis, suggested I translate *Antre*, I took up the challenge.

Perhaps it is presumptuous of me to attempt to translate feminist creative writing, but then any attempt to render creative writing into another language is presumptuous. To translate a creative text always means, in a sense, to make it your own, and there is the key element of women's experience in Madeleine's writing that can never be mine.

I apologize to Madeleine and the reader for every time my translation falls short, either because I am a man, or for whatever other reason. But I do not feel that being a man should exclude me from translating Madeleine's writing. I do not feel the 'feminine' in her writing is totally exterior to me, opposite to me. *Antre* also speaks to me, and of me. Madeleine reveals and explores the hidden stories of her mother and her foremothers, she seeks the sister who 'is not yet,' but she also tells of her sons. She breaks down the barriers that separate women and men, refuses the rigid dualisms of patriarchy. For her, feminism is not the battle of the sexes; it is the end of the battle of the sexes. (This is not to say, of course, that any equation can be made between what patriarchy does to women and what it does to men.) But these questions are too complex and difficult for me to even begin to deal with here. My purpose is to bring *Antre* to English-speaking readers, and I have done my best to do justice to it and to them.

Madeleine Gagnon is a key figure in the wave of French-language women writers that came to prominence in the seventies. When Elaine Marks and

Isabelle de Courtivron compiled their English-language introduction to the 'new French feminisms,' Madeleine was the one North American writer they included.³ These 'new feminist writers' attempt to break free from the built-in assumptions of language by searching for new ways of writing and thinking. They combine poetry and philosophy, theory and fiction, the personal and the political. They work words in different ways, in subversive ways, disrupting the linearity of conventional discourse, deconstructing grammar, sabotaging the symbolism of patriarchy, stripping words to their bare meanings and breaking open language to let it say what is unsaid and unsayable in the language of patriarchy. Through these linguistic transgressions, they expand cultural space to liberate territory for women's expression.

Since language is a central preoccupation of this new feminist writing, the language of the text itself becomes an important subject of the writing, and the deconstruction and transformation of vocabulary and syntax within the text becomes part of the content. In her writing, Madeleine explores language, subverting and reshaping it from the inside, sometimes creating new means of expression, sometimes going back to the roots of words, pursuing an 'archaeology' of language and, through it, of society.⁴ She practises a rejuvenation of language, a recuperation of what has been silenced, a revalidation of women's words and experience.

This kind of writing presents special problems for the translator. I would like to briefly discuss two of those difficulties I encountered in *Antre*.

Grammatical gender must be handled carefully in the translation of texts where the relations between the sexes is a central concern. In French, the fact that all nouns and third-person pronouns are either feminine or masculine, and the rule that the masculine 'embraces' the feminine cause difficulties for those concerned with sexism in language. It has certainly proven an obstacle to the introduction of inclusive language. In new feminist writing, this masculine bias in the grammar is often used to advantage. The gender of nouns and pronouns becomes a tool the writer uses to comment on language and society.

In translating *Antre*, always rendering 'elles' and 'ils' as 'they' would have been a definite error. When these pronouns refer to people, their gender is usually important. I toyed with the idea of trying to distinguish two 'they's' in English, one feminine and one masculine, by capitalizing one or using some other graphic device, but rejected this idea since it was a visual manipulation of language not used in the original; it would have constituted an unwarranted disruption in the text. I opted, finally, for using the singular 'she' to translate 'elles' where the feminine gender was important; this is the mirror image of the tactic of avoiding the generic use of 'he' in English by switching to a plural, e.g. 'Doctors.... They....' instead of 'A doctor.... He....' For example, on page 27, I translated, 'carnés de haine ces enfants capotés dont *elles* ont disent-ils dévoré le coeur' by 'flesh-coloured with hate these flipped children whose hearts, they say, *she* has devoured' (my italics). 'They, 'on the other hand, seemed to work for the mascu-

line plural. In context, 'they' feels solidly masculine to me when it is not specifically feminine; it is the norm versus the specific, the marked, the Other. For example, on page 14, '...they preached logical metaphor and coherent images to me. I quenched my thirst on their nonsense at the gates of accepted madnesses and absolved murders,...' This solution sacrifices the feminine plural, which in many instances would be more appropriate than the singular, but it preserves the gender distinction which is essential to the text.

Other central themes and key words also presented problems. Madeleine and other writers speak of 'writing the body,' saying that their way of writing proceeds from the body, that the sexual differentiation of women is also a source of their creativity and distinguishes their work from traditional patriarchal writing.

Central to this theme of 'writing the body' is the concept of 'jouissance.' 'Jouissance' and the corresponding verb 'jouir' are key words in *Antre*. In everyday writing these words are often tricky to translate into English. Their special significance in new feminist writing can make them even more difficult. Literally, 'jouissance' means 'enjoyment' or 'pleasure'. It can refer to many kinds of enjoyment, including enjoyment in the legal sense or 'enjoyment of good health'. But in the writings of Madeleine and other French-language feminist writers, 'jouissance' refers primarily to sensual pleasure, sensual pleasure covering the whole range from joy of self-discovery and self-realization, to sexual orgasm ('jouir' can mean simply 'to come').

The importance of 'jouissance' presents a special problem in translating *Antre*. While, in other contexts, the various occurrences of 'jouir' and 'jouissance' might have been translated in various ways, or even paraphrased, in *Antre* such solutions would have erased a key element of the work. To use a weaving image, a favourite one of Madeleine's, 'jouissance' is like a brightly-coloured thread running through a tapestry; if the thread changes colour, the intricate pattern of the tapestry is destroyed. I therefore felt it essential to translate 'jouissance' consistently.

I finally decided to use 'pleasure' for both the verb 'jouir' and the noun 'jouissance.' 'To pleasure' is not quite the equivalent of 'jouir' since the former is primarily transitive and the latter normally intransitive, but this presented no major problems. In fact, at one point, Madeleine makes 'jouir' transitive (... tu n'as pas droit de jouir.... D'être jouie.' - '... you have no right to pleasure.... To be pleased.' p. 19). 'Pleasure' as a verb may seem archaic, but I feel it best convey the flavour of the original. And I like the idea of 'pleasuring' and 'being pleased' whether in a purely sexual, or more figurative, sense. It is the same kind of recuperation and revitalization of fossilized words and meanings, and forgotten or obscured experience that Madeleine practises.

I am solely responsible for the final version of this translation, but it was by no means a solo effort. My re-reading of *Antre* was shared with Madeleine, with my

companion in life, Phyllis, and especially with fellow translator and Madeleine's long-time friend, and now my friend, Jean-Antonin Billard.

Howard Scott
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Notes

- 1 (Montréal: Les Editions La Presse, 1976). An excerpt of our translation was published in *Canadian Women's Studies / Les Cahiers de la Femme*, vol. 1, no. 3, (spring / printemps 1979), pp. 71-75. Another translation of the book has been published: *The Eugélonne*, translated by Gerry Denis, Alison Hewitt, Donna Murray, Martha O'Brien (Victoria, Toronto: Press Porcépic, 1982).
- 2 'Louky Bersianik's *L'Euguélonne*: Problems of Translating the Critique of Language in New Quebec Feminist Writing/unpublished thesis (Concordia University, 1984).
- 3 'Body I' in *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, translated by Isabella de Courtivron. (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), pp. 179-180. Excerpt from 'Mon Corps dans l'écriture/in *La Venue à l'écriture* (with Hélène Cixous and Annie Leclerc) (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1977), pp. 63-116.
- 4 Another of her books, *Lueur (Glimmer)* (Montreal: VLB Editeur, 1979), is subtitled *Archaeological Novel*.

Reference: Scott, Howard, « Translator's Introduction », in Madeleine Gagnon, *Lair*, Toronto, Coach House Press, 1989, p. 5-10.