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BETWEEN THE TWO CULTURES: WRITING
ÉCRIRE DANS LA MAISON DU PÈRE

[Exerpt]

TRANSLATING THE BOOK into English, which I'm now doing, is a pleasure of a different sort, which isn't to say it's easy. After my first attempt at it, I was horrified at how awkward my English prose seemed, compared with the style of the French original. Somehow the flow of the original seemed to be based on the relationship with the Québécois audience that I could feel in every sentence: they were the readers I was dialoguing with, and in English the text seemed cut off from its original energy, oversimplified and boring. My first temptation was to abandon the idea of translating it and be content with letting it exist only in French; maybe it wasn't as good as I'd thought after all, and that way my English-Canadian compatriots would never find out! But as I began to reread and revise my attempt at translation I discovered that translating is above all a matter of distancing oneself from the original – and that it takes time, and at least three revisions, before the text begins to flow in the other language. There are of course small changes – facts or dates about the literary works and their historical context that need to be explained by the addition of a word or a phrase for the English-Canadian reader. But mostly, I'm discovering that translating is an activity that involves playing with the *surface* level of meanings: kind of like standing in front of a mirror trying on different outfits until one finds the one that fits a particular mood and translates to the world the being within. Often I find that asking a friend or colleague to read and comment on my English version helps me to achieve that last step of distancing from the original that makes the writing really flow.

To translate someone else's work is an activity that seems to me to have strong parallels with literary criticism (one has to “disappear” into another person's consciousness). That part of the translator's art, I'm glad to say, is not required of me. But what I'm discovering about translation is that it's also a fascinating lesson in what constitutes good writing within a specific language.

Reference: *Language and Society*, No. 28, Fall 1989, p. 38.