

Judith Woodsworth

Out of the Shadows: Translators Take Centre Stage



CHEADLE, Norman and Lucien PELLETIER (eds) (2007), *Canadian Cultural Exchange / Échanges culturels au Canada. Translation and Transculturation / Traduction et transculturation*, Waterloo, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 432 p.

Out of the Shadows: Translators Take Centre Stage

Mme de Sévigné compared translations to bad servants delivering the very opposite of the message with which they are charged. (Taylor 300)

This quotation reflects a common perception of translation and translators in the days of Mme de Sévigné, the 17th-century French writer so often cited in the purported “diaries” of Proust’s mother, which form one of the narrative threads in Kate Taylor’s novel, *Mme Proust and the Kosher Kitchen*. Translation is viewed as a “bad servant,” hence not only inferior, but also, in accordance with the prevailing “belles infidèles” notion, a betrayal. Mme Proust herself does not accept this downgrading of the act of translation. On the contrary, “setting aside the doubts of Mme de Sévigné,” she resolutely works her way through Ruskin’s *The Bible of Amiens*, producing an initial French draft on the basis of which her son Marcel is able to create a more literary, and publishable, work of art. *Mme Proust and the Kosher Kitchen*, a work of fiction layering writing upon reading and translating, is one of a number of recent literary works in which translators are protagonists and in which the act of translation is given a place of importance.

Translators, who throughout history have been “widely scorned ... severely criticized ... distrusted, even called turncoats and traitors” (Delisle and Woodsworth xiii), have only recently emerged from the shadows. Often anonymous, invisible, or at best unappreciated, their work has long been conveyed by the kind of negative metaphor cited above. As John Dryden, a

contemporary of Mme de Sévigné, writes in the “Dedication” to his translation of the *Aeneid*, for example, a translator is like a slave labouring in another man’s vineyard (qtd. in Lefevre 24). However, the translation profession has grown and matured since the second half of the 20th century, a period of increasing internationalization and cultural exchange. Translators have become more visible and the profession better organized. To give some examples of these developments, sophisticated training programs have been established and legislation has been enacted to allow for the designation of “certified” translators and to improve copyright protection of translations.

Canada, a country of official bilingualism by virtue of specific legislation, as well as a country of significant immigration, has necessarily been the location of a considerable volume of translation in all fields. Consequently, Canada has been at the forefront of the move to enhance the social, legal, and economic status of translators. Canadians have also been major contributors to the discipline of translation studies. Translation scholarship in Canada has focused on translation as a linguistic phenomenon, and then as a cultural one. Efforts have been made to document discourse about translation and to examine metatexts or prefatorial material in which translators have reflected on their work, displaying an ever increasing sense of self on the part of translators. In addition, Canada has been a breeding ground for bilingual, even multilingual, texts, in which linguistic and cultural difference are in the foreground, translation a central theme, and translators the characters.

Women’s double discourse

Canadian women writers have placed particular emphasis on the phenomena of language and translation. In a sense, women’s discourse is always double, and writing is always a translative process. Two feminist writers provide interesting examples: prominent Quebec feminist Nicole Brossard has used language and “linguistic deconstruction” (Flotow 15) as a powerful tool. Franco-Ontarian Lola Lemire Tostevin, less well known but equally interesting for our purposes, explores questions of linguistic identity in works of poetry and prose featuring translation and bilingual writing. In these revolutionary forms of writing, translation and identity are inextricably linked.

Brossard’s post-modern novel, *Le Désert mauve*,¹ is about translation itself, although, curiously, it presents translation from French to French. Its form has been described as a triptych: the first part is a narrative, the third is its purported “translation,” and the central part recounts how the “translator” discovers the book, decides to translate, and reflects on the process. Through this French-to-French translation, *Le Désert mauve* provides a “meditation on

writing as translation” and highlights the pull experienced by Francophone women between opposite poles: “feminist consciousness as a simultaneous translation from an alien tongue” (Parker 134). The alien tongue is English, of course, but also patriarchal language in general.² The language and culture of Quebec defend themselves against English-Canadian culture at home and against the encroaching Anglophone culture from the United States (which at the same time has its attractions); in addition, Quebec must distinguish itself from France.

Lola Lemire Tostevin, a Franco-Ontarian who lives and writes in English, “makes a textual strategy of speaking with a forked tongue” (Moyes 75). In earlier volumes of poetry, for example, some lines and even some poems are written in French. In her 1994 novel *Frog Moon*, the narrator, like herself, is a Franco-Ontarian who ends up finding her voice as an English writer. For Tostevin, the loss of the mother tongue is problematic, experienced as “a loss of memory or identity, a loss that intensifies the fragmentation of the subject” (Billingham 111), which is reflected in the shifting of the narrator Laura’s voice from first to third person. As she gravitates toward English, and attempts to confront and reconcile the dual/duelling forces within her, “translative activity allows for much creativity and diversity” (Ross 166). Nicknamed “Khaki,” which means “frog” in Cree, Laura is like an amphibian herself—able to mutate, live a double existence, and construct an identity that lies “in between.” Her dualism transforms itself from a loss and silence into a gain and expression through creation.

Lola Lemire Tostevin’s relation to her Northern Ontario identity translates itself through code-switching, or what Sherry Simon has called “effets de traduction” (*Trafic* 172, for example), through personal reflections, and in the end, through an explicit reference to the act of “translation.” In the excerpt that follows, note the words with the prefix “trans”:

The only tongue that could tell my parents’ story is the tongue I have all but lost ... I cultivated my second language and it replaced my first. As he [my father] speaks to me in French, the words, as I wrote them down, *transform* themselves into English. Not only do I *translate* his telling into writing, his history into fiction, but his language into another language ...

Perhaps this is a writer’s function, or the daughter’s role. The denial of a family history as simple reconstruction, each *translation* a facet in the endless possibilities of a story or a life ... The writer as alchemist, practising the arcane art of *transmuting* elements of reality into the shining, enduring element of fiction. The daughter practising the magical art of *transfiguration*. (Tostevin 161)

Tostevin considers that translation has played a major role in her writing, “since all language is a translation of sorts” and since writing is an ongoing translation process.³

This article examines the figure of the translator in two recent examples: the first is the last complete novel published by Carol Shields and the other a first novel by Toronto journalist Kate Taylor.⁴ Translators take centre stage, as it were: the protagonists are actual translators, working from one language to another (as opposed to the pseudo-translator in Brossard’s novel), and the act of translation itself (as opposed to the figurative or metaphorical presence of translation in Tostevin’s novel) is actually embedded in the plot. It is no coincidence that these works are written by women. In both instances, as in the case of Brossard or Tostevin, translation is associated with a search for identity, with loss and upheaval, with clashes of culture, and ultimately, with finding one’s voice. While perhaps less radical, less experimental in their treatment of language than Brossard or Tostevin, Shields and Taylor have produced feminist novels that could be considered both post-modern and “metafictions” in that they both involve writers/translators reflecting about writing—which Shields describes as “incestuous waters, a woman writer who is writing about a woman writer who is writing” (208). They weave together themes of hybridity, search for identity, and cultural exchange.

Carol Shields’s Reta Winters as translator and writer

The protagonist of Carol Shields’s novel *Unless* is both a translator and novelist. Beginning as the creator of “light” fiction, and at the same time translator of a seasoned feminist French author, Reta Winters eventually gives up translating, devoting more of her creative energies to her own writing, and leaving the French author to “self-translate.” The central drama in the novel is the loss of Reta’s eldest daughter, Norah, who has mysteriously taken to sitting on a Toronto street corner in a near catatonic state, holding up a sign bearing only one word: GOODNESS. Her family, unable to understand this sudden flight from normalcy, nevertheless tries to help her out—with food, money, warm clothes, for example. Parallel to the main plot is perhaps the true “drama”: the way in which translator/writer Reta Winters comes to terms with her own grief, and with the general injustice suffered by all oppressed and silenced women, by finding her own voice as a writer. At the end of the novel, the mystery is revealed: Norah was injured while reaching out to help a Muslim woman who had set herself on fire. The trauma caused her to reject her boyfriend, family, school, and middle-class comfort,

and take to the streets. Learning about Norah—and her brush with “otherness”—brings Reta back to her own reality and closer to her true mission of writing.

The book begins with a bibliography. Expressing sympathy for the disappearance of Reta’s daughter, a friend says to her, “you have your writing,” which leads Reta to “count her blessings” by enumerating her publications. The long and detailed list (3–16) is worth examining for its striking alternation between translation and writing, and for the evolution of her work to increasingly serious fiction.

Reta’s literary output begins with a translation and introduction to Danielle Westerman’s book of poetry, *Isolation (L’Île)*. Completed one month before Norah was born, the translation is tied to the fate of the daughter; the gestation and delivery of both occur at the same time. Danielle Westerman, an older, established writer, was Reta’s professor in the French Department at University of Toronto. She has served as Reta’s mentor and has guided her, and others, personally and professionally, even finding her an editor for her fiction (175). Reta’s views on this early work reflect the age-old inferiority translators feel toward the authors they are translating: “I am a little uneasy about claiming *Isolation* as my own writing.” Westerman, on the other hand, holds the more current view, advanced by translation theorists in the later 20th century: “translation, especially of poetry, is a creative act. Writing and translating are convivial ... not oppositional, and not at all hierarchical” (3). Reta calls her introduction to *Isolation* “creative,” but for the wrong reasons: not because it is her own work of criticism, but because she feels that she has no idea what she is talking about. On rereading it, she feels “shame” and “pretension,” and attributes the “problem” to having been too heavily into Derrida at the time (4). These feelings of self-doubt and of being an “imposter” are not uncommon, as we will see later on when looking at Taylor’s character, Marie Prévost.

The translation is followed by a short story entitled “The Brightness of a Star,” which appears in an anthology of Young Ontario Voices published by the “Pink Onion Press.” Reta downplays or undervalues her own writing by comparing it to a (female) hobby: “I dabbled in writing. It was my macramé, my knitting” (4) and further trivializes it with the rather comical name of the press. She characterizes her next short story, “Icon,” as derivative, “rather Jamesian”; it is self-published by her group of friends who have given themselves the suggestive title of “Stepping Stone Press” (5).

In comparison, her next work, *Alive*, a translation of *Pour Vivre*, volume one of Danielle Westerman’s memoirs, is published by Random House, a more

legitimate publishing house than Pink Onion or Stepping Stone.⁵ She remains self-effacing about the status of the translation, and self-deprecating about its quality compared with the original, quoting a review in the *Toronto Star* that has “slammed” the translation as “clumsy” (6). In the following quotation, she is slightly more assertive, while still deferring to the “authority” of the author.

I may be claiming translation as an act of originality, but, as I have already said, it was Danielle, in her benign way, wrinkling her disorderly forehead, who had urged me to believe that the act of shuffling elegant French into readable and stable English is an aesthetic performance. (6)

Next, Reta writes a bilingual text, commissioned for an encyclopaedia of art. She loses a year, as she says, “busy thinking about the business of being a writer, about being writerly.” Combining personal concerns with professional ones, as she will continue to do throughout the novel, she worries about “being in Danielle’s shadow, never mind Derrida, and needing my own writing space” (6).

She then translates Westerman’s *Les femmes et le pouvoir*, the “immense” second volume of the memoirs, published as *Women Waiting*. This time, she reports, the reviews are good: *The Globe and Mail* describes her work as “sparkling and full of ease” and *The New York Times* as “an achievement” (8). This success sparks offers to do more translation, but Reta begins to feel that she could write her own material. Looking for a voice and genre, she rejects both short stories and kiddie lit. Her next publication is *Shakespeare and Flowers*. Despite the fact that it is published in San Francisco, and that she gets a contract even before she writes one word, she still does not view this as serious writing, as indicated by her label for it: “a wee giftie book” to be sold in greeting card stores (9).

She turns once again to translation, doing Westerman’s *Eros: Essays*. Hastily translated, the book is nonetheless hugely successful (10). After this, Reta and her family visit the region of France where Westerman grew up. On this vacation, Reta reads novels day after day, and gets an idea for a novel of her own: it will be about two characters, Alicia and Roman, who live in Wychwood, a city like Toronto. Her title, *My Thyme Is Up*, is a pun, from an old family joke, because she intends to write a light novel, with a happy ending (14). This book wins the Offenden Prize, which recognizes “literary quality and ... accessibility,” thus confirming the author’s intentions and relegating the work, as she says, to “minor status” (81).

After this first novel, Reta translates *The Middle Years*, volume three of the memoirs. As she praises the stylistic strength of this work, the “gorgeous flu-

idity and expansion of phrase,” which her translation, she claims, doesn’t begin to convey, Reta mirrors many literary translators whose prefaces and other “metatexts” are apologies for their inadequacies (14). At the conclusion of this “auto-bibliography,” Reta is planning a sequel to *My Thyme Is Up*. She has no idea what will happen in this book, she says. The gestation of her second novel and the transformation of her work into serious, legitimate writing will run parallel to the resolution of her daughter’s situation, and ultimate reconciliation.

Reta Winters is bilingual. Her mother was a *pure laine* Francophone from Montreal and her father, who was from Edinburgh, spoke English with a Scottish accent. Her mother always spoke to her in French and her father in English, and she was allowed to reply in either language. There is no apparent angst over her linguistic duality or mixed background; in fact, she benefits from this immersion in two languages: “doubleness clarified the world ... Every object, every action, had an echo, an explanation ... The French-English dictionary with its thready blue cover was our family bible, since we were a family unattached to formal religious practice” (146).

Unless, then, as can be expected, is laced with a fair dose of French words and phrases—code-switching that reflects the narrator’s upbringing as the child of a Francophone mother, her occupation as a translator, and her friendship with the French woman whose life work she is translating. It is telling that the character in her novel, Roman,⁶ is a trombonist, an occupation that came to her quite by chance as she fiddled with a paper clip, which is called a *trombone* in French (266). While Reta appears to feel at home in her bilingualism, other characters grapple with their “in-betweenness” and lost identity. In the novel within the novel, Roman grieves for his relatives in Albania with whom he has lost touch (237) and longs to visit the land of his forefathers (267).

Danielle Westerman has emigrated to Canada from France; she is a professor at an English-Canadian institution, University of Toronto, where she teaches French civilization. Westerman is Jewish, a Holocaust survivor, and bisexual; *The Middle Years*, volume three of her memoirs, explores numerous love affairs with both men and women, we are told (14). She is the archetypal exile, having left her own family after her mother tried to kill her, and having left Europe after the Nazis tried to annihilate her race. At the end of *Unless*, in the “book within the book” that is Danielle Westerman’s memoirs, she is finally reconciling her two identities as daughter and writer (319).

Arthur Springer, Reta’s new publisher, says that “identity is the dominant mystery of our lives” (279). There is a touch of irony in this because Springer

is not an altogether sympathetic character. Having tried to exert his power over Reta in order to substantially edit her book, he also comes across as overly pedantic. However, he does underline a common thread in this novel, and Taylor's, which is the link between writing and the quest for identity.

Unless offers interesting commentary on translation and relations between translators and writers. Early on, after the publication of one of the translations, Reta is asked to deal with the media since Westerman is "too old, too distinguished" to handle a day of interviews (25). Thus the translator speaks with the voice of the author, both in the text and about the text. One interviewer asks her an important question: "Wouldn't you prefer, Mrs. Winters, to pursue your own writing rather than translate Dr. Westerman's work?" (30). At times, Reta is torn between her different activities—her book on animals in Shakespeare as a follow-up to *Shakespeare and Flowers*, the translation of the fourth and final volume of Danielle Westerman's memoirs, writing her second novel, and cleaning her house (63). Nonetheless, she defines herself as a "writer and translator (French into English)" (43). She makes observations about the translation of Westerman's *L'Île (Isolation)*:

I found the poems very tricky to translate (poetry is not my specialty), but I was younger then and willing to stretch myself and be endlessly patient about moving words back and forth, singing them out loud under my breath as translators are told to do, attempting to bring the fullness of the poet's intention to the work. The poems were like little toys with moving parts, full of puns and allusions to early feminism, most of which I let fall into a black hole, I'm sorry to say. (101)

What Shields gets right about the translation of poetry is its difficulty, the central importance of musicality, the helpful technique of reading out loud, and the importance of trying to retain the intention (if not the exact meaning) of the translator. The manner in which the process is described, i.e., metaphorically, is common in descriptions of poetic translation.⁷ It is interesting to note that Reta feels that she has not been faithful to the feminist underpinnings of Westerman's writing, and that she needs to make apologies for her betrayal.

In the novel, there are discussions of some of the "problems of translation" at the micro level. The term *unless*, for example, cannot be expressed adequately in French: "*À moins que* doesn't have quite the heft and *sauf* is crude" (224–25). Interesting as well is the bond between author and translator. When volume two of the memoirs comes out, Danielle calls Reta "my true sister" ("*ma vraie soeur*") (8).⁸ The novel also sheds light on the hierarchical relations between writer and translator, on the "authority" of the author: West-

erman "is a woman with twenty-seven honorary degrees and she's given the world a shelf full of books. She's given her thoughts, her diagram for a new, better, just world" (223). Reta, a former student of Westerman, remains her friend and continues to be guided by her wisdom, frequently quoting her. For example: "The trouble with children,' Danielle Westerman once said, 'is that they aren't interested in childhood'" (142). It is typical of Carol Shields that the wisdom of Westerman should extend to ordinary woman's activities: "Danielle Westerman and I have discussed the matter of housework" (62). On the other hand, one of Westerman's transcendental dictums, "Goodness but not greatness," is not only quoted throughout the novel (115, 249, 283), but is also echoed in the sign held up by Norah as she sits on the street corner. For Reta, Danielle is "the other voice in [her] head, almost always there, sometimes the echo, sometimes the soloist" (151). Reta heeds this voice, sometimes imitating her in very concrete ways: "Why do I have red curtains in my kitchen? Because Simone de Beauvoir loved red curtains; because Danielle Westerman loves red curtains out of respect for Beauvoir, and I love them because of Danielle" (170).

Danielle once wore her hair in a "shining chignon," which is how Reta now wears her hair, "a tribute—and not unconscious at all—to young Danielle, early Danielle, that vibrant girl-woman who invented feminism" (180). Nevertheless, we do witness the translator trying to assert her own authority. She makes suggestions about the author's choice of words, although timidly and without persisting: "I let it go. A writer's *parti pris* are always—must be—accommodated by her translator. I know that much after all these years" (63). She even disagrees with Danielle Westerman in a discussion about editors, but does not have the energy to quarrel directly (177).

As Reta makes progress on her new novel, she becomes less inclined to translate. She and Danielle meet, they discuss volume four of the translation, which Reta has decided not to translate, to Danielle's "consternation," and then they discuss the problems of Alicia and Roman in Reta's novel (181). This marks an important transition from translating to writing, and puts the two women on a more equal footing. Danielle, however, does not suffer this transformation easily. She becomes "cranky," shows her "disappointment," and accuses Reta of abandoning the "discourse" for the "unworthiness of novel writing." Reta, still lacking confidence in her own form of expression, finds herself conceding: "what really is the point of novel writing when the unjust world howls and writhes?" (223–24).

In addition to writing novels, Reta finds her voice by composing letters. These letters are addressed to fictitious recipients, signed with some variation of her name and address, and always left unsent. Interspersed in the text, they

are described as the letters of a “madwoman, constructing a fantasy of female exclusion,” which, interestingly, she keeps from Danielle (227).

Once Reta has abandoned her translation project, Danielle Westerman sets out to translate her own work—which is a very rare enterprise indeed in real life. While the results are described as “both accurate and charming,” Danielle cannot really be said to be working at full capacity. She translates about a page a day, which she faxes to Reta for “tweaking” (suggesting the collaborative approach we will see later when reading about Proust’s translations of Ruskin). Yet, translation is keeping her mind sharp, in the way that crossword puzzles do, so that, at age 86, she keeps writing and expanding her memoirs (319).

Danielle, Reta’s mentor, has now become both author and translator. Conversely, upon abandoning translation, Reta the writer comes of age. She begins to plan her third novel, which she describes as a “gift from Danielle Westerman” and which she characterizes—still timidly—as an almost “serious” book: “There you have it: stillness and power, sadness and resignation, contradictions and irrationality. *Almost, you might say*, the materials of a *serious* book” (320, my emphasis).

Unless is a story of coming to terms with powerlessness by asking questions, breaking the silence, and finding one’s voice. Carol Shields’s character, Reta, interprets not only the work of Danielle Westerman, but also her person when she describes Danielle as having absorbed the “paradox of subjugation” (251). Reta’s husband, a doctor, draws a parallel between Danielle Westerman, their daughter Norah, and his mother, who have all suffered trauma and still suffer shame or sorrow (269). Reta builds on her husband’s theory and maintains that the world is split in two, between those who are born with power and those who are not:

those like Norah, like Danielle Westerman, like my mother, like my mother-in-law, like me, like all of us who fall into the uncoded otherness in which the power to assert ourselves and claim our lives has been displaced by a compulsion to shut down our bodies and seal our mouths and be as nothing against the fireworks and streaking stars and blinding light of the Big Bang. That’s the problem. (270)

Danielle Westerman had previously interpreted the fate of Norah in the light of powerlessness. Reta recalls another one of her statements that she had not believed when she first translated it and which now becomes relevant: “Subversion of society is possible for a mere few; *inversion* is more commonly the tactic for the powerless, a retreat from society that borders on the catatonic” (218). “Unless we ask questions,” Reta realizes. She asks Danielle Westerman

what interrupted her childhood and learns that it was her mother who had tried to strangle her when she stayed out late one night. She also asks her mother-in-law why she has been silent during the months of Norah’s absence, to which her mother-in-law replies: “Because no one asked me.” Publisher Arthur Springer uses a cliché technique on her mother-in-law: “Tell me all about your life, Lois,” and she begins to speak. Reta remarks that no one, not even her own husband, has ever said: Tell me all about your life, Reta (316).

Asking questions and listening for the answers allows for reading, interpretation, translation, and ultimately writing. This is the way to take control, to take back the power: modes of *subversion* rather than *inversion*. Reta comes to the conclusion that this is the way to break the silence to which women are so often relegated, and to find and give expression to one’s voice, in a dignified and serious medium.

Dualisms and translation in Kate Taylor’s tale of three women

Translation is a prominent feature of the three narrative strands that make up Kate Taylor’s novel, *Mme Proust and the Kosher Kitchen*, which extends from the late 19th century into the dawn of the 21st century. The first, told in the first person, is the story of Marie Prévost, a conference interpreter who travels to France to do research on Proust at the Bibliothèque Nationale, posing as an “interloper,” a “tourist in the halls of scholarship” (17–18).⁹ Instead of the important Proust manuscripts, she is given access to the diaries of his mother, which she sets out to translate. Marie has fallen in love with Max, the son of Sarah Bensimon. The second narrative, told by Marie, is Sarah’s story; she came to Canada as an immigrant child and has been “translating” her experience in her own particular way. The diaries make up the third strand. They tell the story of Marcel Proust, filtered or “translated” by his mother, Mme Proust, who, according to the novel, helped her famous son produce and publish translations, thereby launching his literary career.

While the diaries of Mme Proust are fictitious, they are grounded in historical research. Taylor drew on Proust’s correspondence with his mother to recreate the voice of Mme Proust. The diaries reveal an anxious mother, worried about her son’s poor health, lack of direction, and extravagant habits. Most of the events, be they day-to-day ones such as an incident in which Proust breaks his mother’s precious Venetian glass, or public and political ones, such as the Dreyfus Affair, are based in fact. It is worth noting that the building in

which the diaries are said to be written is unmarked. Marie Prévost visits the various Parisian sites where Proust lived and wrote his great novel; there are plaques on these buildings, but at 9 Boulevard Maleherbes, where Mme Proust allegedly wrote in her notebooks, the “elegant facade goes unmarked” (130–31). This is woman’s writing, after all, private and anonymous.

Kate Taylor has worked to give the diaries a somewhat stilted, old-fashioned, and Gallic flavour, making them sound like a translation. She says, for example, that Marcel and his father have “reprised their correspondence” (83), whereas the English term “resumed” would have been more appropriate. Taylor, in *Mme Proust and the Kosher Kitchen*, comments on both the theory and practice of translation, as does Carol Shields in *Unless*. She underlines the hierarchy within the field: interpreting, translating, and literary translating. She reflects on the professional realities of publishing translations in Proust’s time, and makes credible observations on interpreting and translation in her own time. Marie’s work as an interpreter is accurately described in the novel.¹⁰ The attitude toward interpreters is also realistic: no one notices the conference interpreter and no one says “good job” (425).

Marie moves from interpreting to translating hesitantly. Like Reta Winters, she is reticent and apologetic about her abilities: “These are my own translations. You will excuse me if they are not as elegant as they might be” (22). Her regular line of work is interpreting, which she likens to the work of a typist, whereas literary translation is “loftier” (23). Marie finds that the role of translator is indistinguishable from that of editor.¹¹ Instead of translating the diaries in their entirety, she picks and chooses, selecting the most telling entries and leaving out the most mundane. Echoing the Jean Anouilh epigraph at the beginning of the novel, she says, “I have begun to give her life shape.” She is both critical of herself (this is “unscholarly”) and ambitious (“May a translator not aspire to storytelling?”). She is also aware, however, of the potential for hubris or even stupidity: “A fledgling literary translator, already testing the limits of her little wings, eyes the far-off treetops where the editors and novelists nest, and stupidly thinks that with a bit of flapping she might join them” (32).

Early on, we learn what has motivated Marie to pursue a career as an interpreter and then as a translator. She describes herself as a 15-year-old girl from Montreal visiting Toronto. In a flashback, she retraces her childhood in Paris; her phrase “recollection of childhood as something now past” has a very Proustian ring, reminiscent of the original translation of the title of Proust’s novel, “Remembrance of Things Past” (46). Marie is from a mixed family: her mother is an English-speaking Irishwoman and her father is French-Canadian (a

reversal of the Québécoise-Scots couple who are the parents of Reta Winters). They met in Paris, but later live in Montreal.

The explanation of how Marie came to translate is rounded out toward the conclusion of the novel once the story of her own life has gradually unfolded together with those of Jeanne Proust (and her son Marcel) and Sarah Bensimon (and her son Maxime). Marie’s fascination with Proust begins at a young age and continues for some years. Later in life, she finishes reading his work in French, and then in English translation. She compares the two versions, occupying herself with a “doubled reading project,” with Proust as her “companion” and “solace in an empty place” (407).

It is not unusual for translators to have ambivalent feelings toward the writer they are translating, to feel a strong bond along with a need to break away, as we have seen in relation to Reta Winters and Danielle Westerman. While Marie does not translate Proust himself, she reads his work, in two languages, along with biographies. It was in reading Proust that she discovered his mother and it was the translation of his mother’s diaries that helped her find her own voice. She thinks of Proust as a “friend, a comrade in pursuit of memory” and feels a “personal gratitude” toward him (86). She points out that Proust himself experienced the same “demon” when he was translating Ruskin, putting him on a pedestal and devoting years of his life to Ruskin pilgrimages. Translating delays, but also fosters, artistic maturity. This motif of translation as “pre-text”—an exercise or preparation for creation—is quite frequent and here applies to Marie herself:

Because I lost Max, I went looking for Marcel but instead I found his mother ... and in the pages of her diary, it was often the voice of Mrs. Segal, my mother-in-law who wasn’t, that I thought I heard calling to me across the century ... I have found the cure for heartbreak. It is literature ... Perhaps it is time for me, like the great man himself, to stop translating and begin a work of fiction. Perhaps the moment of maturity is at hand. But first I will publish my translations. They are not without interest. (454)

Marie Prévost is not the only translator in the novel. The diaries provide a portrait of Proust the translator, seen through the eyes of his mother, who believes that this is a way he can make progress as a man of letters. Proust published articles on the English art critic John Ruskin, as well as two translations: *La Bible d’Amiens* in 1904 and *Sésame et les Lys* in 1906. It is a matter of fact, not fiction, that Proust actually translated these works from English. This was done with the assistance of his mother, who prepared a “crib,” or rough draft for him. He also had the help of his friend, the English artist Marie Nordlinger, and several others, including Robert d’Humières, the translator of

Kipling, whom Taylor mentions. As Mme Proust reflects in her diary, Proust's own style is evident in his translations, as well as in his prefaces to these early works. "Sur la Lecture," for example, is considered to contain some of the ideas later developed in *Du Côté de chez Swann*. Proust went on to publish a series of pastiches (another form of "translation") for *Le Figaro* in which he imitated the style of 19th-century authors such as Balzac, Flaubert, and Sainte-Beuve (1908). By the following year he was totally involved in the writing of his novel *À la recherche du temps perdu*.

In the novel, we are told that Proust "can't even read a menu in English" (301) and that his mother buys him George Eliot to read in translation (24). However, he is not alone, in his day, in translating from English with very little first-hand knowledge of the source language. There was at the time a fairly widespread *anglophilie*, and many well-known writers thought it important to translate from English. Paul Valéry, for example, following the example of Baudelaire, translator of Edgar Allan Poe, claims to have translated Poe's *Marginalia*, although the manuscripts indicate that he did not produce the actual translation, but merely edited and annotated it (Woodsworth, "Quelques fragments"). However, in addition to following a trend, Proust was motivated by a genuine admiration for Ruskin. As is the case for a number of other writers, or even entire cultures, translation is also a form of exercise or preparation for the art of creation. Like Reta Winters, who sees her translation of *L'Île* as a form of "stretching" (101),¹² and like Marie in this novel, Proust uses his translations as a prelude to his work as a novelist. Translation, a form of reading and rewriting, is used as a springboard to writing.

Taylor underscores the role of Mme Proust. "This is a classic feminist novel, where you find the woman behind the man," she says (personal interview). While Mme Proust concedes that her rough translation is not "literary," and that her English is not as good as it should be (308), she does provide a starting point for Marcel (301). As we have seen, Proust also consults Marie Nordlinger along with others who are more familiar with English. We learn about the process involved in producing the translation, finding a publisher, and preparing the final manuscript. His mother not only helps him at the start but also is there to help him complete the project. When the proofs arrive, she and Marie Nordlinger help him with the revisions. Nordlinger compares the French to the English and draws attention to inaccuracies needing work from Marcel Proust the translator, while Mme Proust indicates the more awkward phrases needing work from Marcel the writer (352).

We also hear—albeit through the filter of his mother's diary—about Proust's view of his work as a translator. He is discouraged by it, and finds that his French is slipping: "I speak no language" (352). He had wanted to do

something for France by writing an appreciation of Ruskin,¹³ but the work of translation is less appealing: "translation is not real work at all" (337). Nevertheless, his mother, who is Jewish, recognizes the role of translation in the process of cultural transmission. Reflecting on the consequences of the Dreyfus Affair, she says:

I think with such admiration of our Ruskin at these times. If a Jewess can transmit a Protestant's understanding of a Gothic arch or rose window, that these great achievements are an expression of our yearning for the spiritual, then surely the Catholic church can be kept safe from overzealous Drefuysards. (355; my emphasis)

There are other, less overt, forms of translation in the novel associated with movement between cultures. Sarah's "kosher kitchen" is itself a translation. In her kitchen she keeps an encyclopedia of French cuisine beside her kosher cookbooks. Sarah is a transplant to Toronto who has never properly come to terms with her new life and hence remains in the space between cultures, trying to speak French with her increasingly resistant son, Maxime, in a city that is unilingual, with an English-speaking husband. She spends much of her time reproducing the cuisine of her native France while taking into account the dietary restrictions of *kashruth*, such as not mixing meat and milk and not using seafood, by using imported ingredients and painstakingly adapting recipes. For Sarah, the kosher kitchen is a "place of reconciliation" (370). In her diaries, Mme Proust also makes the connection between food and heritage. Her father used to joke about kosher laws, saying that the reason Jews ate different food was so that they would not be tempted to socialize with Gentiles. She doesn't have a kosher kitchen, however, and predicts that her grandchildren will be Christians. It makes her sad to think that her sons have "lost a heritage they might have passed on in their turn" (318).

Kate Taylor's novel is a complex tapestry of parallel personalities, pulled in different directions. She has set up a series of what she calls "dualisms" (personal interview): English and French, Jew and Gentile, homosexual and heterosexual. All her characters are on a quest for identity and belonging. Linguistic, cultural, and sexual differences are foregrounded and linked, in one way or another, to the motif of translation.

The novel contains many observations on bilingualism. Bilingual Montreal is compared to unilingual cities such as New York, Paris, and Toronto. Marie enjoys the "edginess" and "instability" of Montreal. Perversely, Montrealers are never comfortable, she points out, but love their city nonetheless (451). Although, in general, Taylor considers Canadians to be "happily bilingual" (personal interview), language and bilingualism are problematic in the novel.

Many of the characters, neither fish nor fowl, are divided between French and English, their situation further complicated by the fact that the French they speak is the French of France rather than the French of Quebec. Max, who speaks French with Marie at McGill, a primarily English university, is referred to as that mythical beast, a Toronto Francophone (118). Bilinguals are “philanderers; having taken two lovers they are always and inevitably cheating” (309). Thus bilingualism, like translation, is associated with illicit commerce and sexuality, with in-betweenness and hybridity.¹⁴

As she explains, Taylor has cast Marie as an interpreter, because she is “isolated” and “caught between two directions like all the characters in the novel” (personal interview). Marie’s lack of belonging results in her alienation from the events around her. When she says that “language is a veil that separates me from experience” (309), this is the reverse of what should be true. Language should give meaning. For her it is a façade, because she is undecided about her background. Her relationship with her mother is not explored, and she is not rooted in her Anglo identity because she is not sympathetic to her mother, who in turn is an outsider because she is neither English- nor French-Canadian. As Marie says in the novel, her mother “has never been permitted to live in her own country. She never really knows where she is” (292).

Taylor has used Jewishness as another one of the poles in her series of dualisms. Mme Proust is Jewish, as are Sarah Bensimon and Marie Nordlinger, whose cousin Reynaldo Hahn is one of the men in Proust’s circle. Jewishness is problematic, of course, set as it is against the backdrop of major historic events such as the Dreyfus Affair, which occurred in Proust’s day, and the Holocaust, which looms over Sarah and her family. Throughout the diaries of Mme Proust, we observe subtle forms of anti-Semitism, even on the part of Mme Proust as she observes other people. For example, in describing Mme Straus, whose salon Marcel frequents, she writes: “Jewish, I am sure, *but* very cultivated” (35; my emphasis). On the other hand, Mme Proust writes that she is saddened when her son reports that Mme Daudet is anti-Semitic (134).

The Dreyfus Affair¹⁵ bitterly divided the Proust family, as it did French society in general. The diaries reveal that Mme Proust and her sons are on the side of Dreyfus, while their father is on the other side. We learn that deprecating remarks are being made about Jews (215) and that there are riots against Dreyfus and the Jews. Mme Proust hears the slogan “death to the Jews” and ends up feeling that both the streets of Paris and her own apartment are hostile to her (257).

This “hostility,” or lost sense of place, echoes the loss expressed by Marie on behalf of her mother, as well as that felt so acutely by Sarah, who has been

uprooted by the Holocaust from her home in Paris and transported to Canada. The Canadian immigration authorities change her name Bensimon to Simon. She is taken in by a childless Jewish Canadian couple, the Plots, but as long as there is no confirmation that Sarah’s parents are indeed dead, they are unable to adopt her formally and give her their name. Sarah’s alienation, distance, and silence also prevent her from becoming a member of the family: “Sarah Simon somehow refused to become Sarah Plot” (75). Later, even in her relatively well-off life as a married woman in Toronto, Sarah continues to grieve the world she has lost (240).

The Holocaust is evoked in various ways. There is an almost perverse teacher who shows “dirty pictures” to his pupils—skeletons that, “indistinguishable one from another” (51), represent a loss of individual identity at its worst. Taylor, however, maintains that this is not a Holocaust novel, but rather a “post-Holocaust” one. It is about memory, she says, about people telling other people, and about the Holocaust as a “massive cultural shadow” (personal interview). Sarah, like Danielle Westerman in *Unless*, is a survivor. Sarah’s son Max is affected because he must put up with his anxious, traumatized mother, because he has no grandparents, and hence has been deprived of part of his heritage.

The two translators-turned-writers, Marie Prévost and Reta Winters, are the Gentiles who, in slightly different ways, right history by breaking the silence and restoring the voices of these women, Marie by telling Sarah’s story, and Reta, through her translation of the Memoirs, by telling Danielle Westerman’s. Marie combs Paris, and surrounding area, for traces of the Holocaust, both at a macro and micro level: she visits a chapel dedicated to victims of Nazism, she makes a trip to the French transit camp Drancy and, at a museum in Paris, discovers a photo of Sarah’s father Philippe, taken at Drancy. For her, this represents “foraging in someone else’s history” (259), which after all is what translators do when they transmit the stories and voices of another culture to their own. Marie goes from translation to story-telling when she imagines the life of Sarah. This is an act of memory—in itself a form of translation—a way of reclaiming Sarah’s life, as Taylor says (personal interview).

The other dualism to which Taylor draws attention to is that of sexual orientation. As mentioned above, Danielle Westerman is bisexual. Marcel Proust, the starting point for Taylor’s novel, was homosexual and his sexuality was problematic in various ways. It was something that he kept from his mother and that caused him feelings of guilt. His friend Marie Nordlinger makes the mistake of falling in love with him, as her double Marie Prévost does with Max. Sexual identity is tied to the quest for identity at other levels. Marie

explains her attraction to Max in these terms: she “lusted for his otherness, to share his language, to fix his history” (422). The sexuality of Marcel and of Max is “unspoken” (433) until Marie, once again, breaks the silence. The figure of breaking glass, denoting both moments of crisis and union,¹⁶ is used several times, culminating in the grand finale when Sarah deliberately and frenetically breaks all her china, mixes both meat and milk dishes, and ruins the kosher kitchen. This ends with a reconciliation of sorts between Sarah and her son, who addresses his mother in her native French tongue, as *Maman*. They come together in an embrace, finally able to grieve for the family he has never known because they did not survive the Holocaust and for the grandchildren his mother will never have because of Max’s homosexuality. “He gave her the name of his childhood ... they stood there together, holding each other in the ruins of the kosher kitchen, finally mourning his grandparents and her grandchildren” (438). This, finally, was their way of breaking the silence about both the Holocaust and Maxime’s sexuality.

Conclusions

Translators and interpreters have long acted as cultural brokers, as go-betweens between different language groups and nations. Often outsiders, hybrids themselves, they have not enjoyed prestige or recognition. Translation studies, cultural studies and, more recently, post-colonial studies, have shed a new light on translation. As Sherry Simon notes, commenting on Homi Bhabha, translation is no longer “confined to its traditional ancillary role as a medium of communication between nations, but elevated to a primary creative activity” (*Gender* 152).

As translation has become an important factor in cultural exchange in Canada, it is significant that women have played so large a role as writers, translators, and theorists. Feminist authors such as Nicole Brossard and Lola Lemire Tostevin, and translators such as Barbara Godard and Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood, have placed issues of identity politics, language, and translation in the forefront. Theorists such as Sherry Simon have stressed the importance of translation practice in cultural production, examining the case of Brossard’s *Le Désert mauve* and other works, in which translation is both the subject and framework.

A bilingual and multiethnic country peopled by countless individuals such as Reta and Marie, who are of mixed parentage, Canada is animated and often divided by language and cultural politics. This cultural and political space provides fertile ground for the problematization of translation. In the two novels we have examined at length here, the characters are full-fledged trans-

lators and translational practice has both real and figurative significance. While neither Carol Shields nor Kate Taylor falls into the category of writer-translator, which is not uncommon in Canada, they have imagined characters in which the professional roles of writer and translator tend toward conflation. Their post-modern, feminist novels blur the borders of gender, language, and religion; in these novels about women who write, the boundaries between translation and creation are also blurred. Translation is a characteristically Canadian means of mediating dualisms and approaching the global problem of powerlessness *vis-à-vis* the powerful and its attendant violence. The fact that translators are also creators elevates the act of translation to a more important, and hence more legitimate, status.

While writing against a Canadian backdrop, with the characters rooted in their bilingual Canadian culture, both Shields and Taylor extend their reach to a more universal level by portraying translators of authors who are not Canadian. Kate Taylor is fascinated by a towering French literary figure, Marcel Proust, although she chooses to approach him through his mother, the woman behind the man, who launched her son’s career through the act of translation. In *Unless*, the work that Reta translates is not from a French-Canadian or Québécois corpus, but is by a French author, albeit one who has chosen to exile herself to Anglophone Toronto.

In both novels, translation is bound up with issues of personal identity, but the problems of translation and identity are tied to the broader Canadian intercultural, or transcultural, context, which transcends purely linguistic considerations. The translators begin in the inferior position—the space between two national languages with strong identities—and derive their own sense of identity based on a subversion of traditional cleavages and a reconciliation of difference.

Blending fiction with life-writing, and prose with theory, translation is a model of cultural hybridity, to use Bhabha’s term. *Unless* and *Mme Proust and the Kosher Kitchen* have provided an opportunity to explore a literary phenomenon that continues around the world, but particularly in Canada: the foregrounding of the translator as an actor in fiction, fiction in which the players are pulled or torn between cultures, and in which translation—like writing—offers the possibility of cultural exchange, reparation or reconciliation, and navigation between difference.

Notes

- 1 Nicole Brossard’s *Le Désert mauve* has been well cited and studied: see, for example, Flotow; Simon (*Trafic* and *Gender*); Brossard (Interview by Durand); Parker.

- 2 In an interview with Marcella Durand, Brossard says that, in Canada and Quebec, "translation has been very important to women writers, translators and publishers because of the way we needed to question patriarchal language. Language was colonizing us, therefore we needed to study it carefully and to find ways to invest it with our own subjectivity."
- 3 This view, expressed in an interview conducted with Lola Lemire Tostevin by email in February 2005, echoes the observation made by Paul Valéry in "Variations sur les *Bucoliques*," a commentary on his translation of Virgil: "Écrire quoique que ce soit ... est un travail de traduction exactement comparable à celui qui opère la transmutation d'un texte d'une langue à l'autre" (qtd. in Woodsworth, "Quelques" 254; Valéry's emphasis).
- 4 This study seeks to focus primarily on two case studies in the English language. However, as the example of Nicole Brossard illustrates, the centre staging of the translator is not at all limited to fiction in English, but is also an important theme in the works of Quebec authors such as Monique LaRue (1989), Louise Dupré (1996), and Hélène Rioux (1998). On the fictional status of Francophone (female) translators, see Barbara Godard (2002).
- 5 Random House is Shields's publisher.
- 6 Roman's name is interesting in itself. It means "novel" in French; it is a common name, in various forms, in Romance languages, yet also has a "foreign" flavour. Winters's Roman is meant to be Albanian.
- 7 See Woodsworth, "Aladdin."
- 8 Baudelaire, who spent more time translating Edgar Allan Poe than he did writing his own poetry, referred to Poe as his "frère spirituel," although in this case the author is recognizing her debt to her translator (Woodsworth, "Quelques").
- 9 There is a traditional view of translators as "traitors," and Reta Winters, as we have seen, has also represented herself as an "imposter."
- 10 To prepare for a conference on AIDS, for example, Marie draws up a list of specialized terms. Taylor had at first imagined this technique, but then checked with a professional interpreter, as she points out in her acknowledgements. She confirmed this in a private interview I conducted at her home on 27 July 2004.
- 11 Note that Reta Winters describes herself as a "long-time editor of Danielle Westerman's work" (80).
- 12 The notion of translation as "pre-text," as an exercise or preparation for original writing, was put forward by certain Romantic poets such as Shelley and developed by Paul Valéry, for example (Woodsworth, "Quelques" 253). The idea of *stretching* has also been used in the context of minority cultures in which translation provides an opportunity for developing the resources of the target language. (See Bill Findlay on the Scots translation of Michel Tremblay, in Delisle and Woodsworth 86.)
- 13 This once again echoes Baudelaire's ambitions in publishing translations of Poe's stories, with biographical and critical introductions (Woodsworth, "Quelques").
- 14 Cf. Sherry Simon in *Le Trafic des langues*; the title itself conveys the idea of illicit commerce.
- 15 The Dreyfus Affair was a political scandal that divided the whole of French society toward the end of the 19th century. In 1894, Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish officer in the French army, was convicted of treason. The affair was exposed by author Émile Zola in his famous article entitled "J'accuse" (1898). Dreyfus was later pardoned, and is

now widely believed to have been innocent, but the case ended up arousing considerable anti-Semitism in France.

- 16 Taylor makes references to the Jewish custom of breaking glass at a Jewish wedding, saying that it stands not for rupture but rather for union (137). In actual fact, however, the breaking of a plate or a glass is meant to remind Jewish people of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, even at a time of celebration.

Works Cited

- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Billingham, Susan. "Trans-lations. Lola Lemire Tostevin Writing Between Cultures." *Sources* 9 (2000): 111–24.
- Brossard, Nicole. "Interview with Nicole Brossard: On Translation & Other Such Pertinent Subjects." By Marcella Durand. *Double Change* 2 (2001). 20 August 2004. <http://www.doublechange.com/issue2/brossard.htm>
- . *Le Désert mauve*. Montréal: Hexagone, 1987.
- De Lotbinière-Harwood, Susanne. *Re-belle et infidèle: la traduction comme pratique de ré-écriture au féminin/The Body Bilingual: Translation as a Re-Writing in the Feminine*. Toronto: Women's Press; Montréal: Editions du Remue-ménage, 1991.
- Delisle, Jean and Judith Woodsworth, eds. *Translators through History*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins; Paris: UNESCO, 1995.
- Dupré, Louise. *La Memoria*. Montréal: XYZ, 1996.
- Flotow, Luise von. *Translation and Gender. Translating in the "Era of Feminism."* Manchester, UK: St. Jerome; Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1997.
- Godard, Barbara. "La traduction comme réception: les écrivaines québécoises au Canada anglais." *TTR* 15.1 (2002): 65–101.
- LaRue, Monique. *Copies conformes*. Montréal: XYZ, 1989.
- Lefevre, André. *Translation/History/Culture: A Sourcebook*. London: Routledge, 1992.
- Moyes, Lianne. "'to bite between the teeth': Lola Lemire Tostevin's bilingual writing practice." *The Aux Canadas Issue: Reading, Writing, and Translation*. Spec. issue of *Textual Studies in Canada* 5 (1994): 75–83.
- Parker, Alice A. *Liminal Visions of Nicole Brossard*. New York: Peter Lang, 1998.
- Rioux, Hélène. *Le Cimetière des éléphants*. Montréal: XYZ, 1998.
- Ross, Colleen. "The Art of Transformation in Lola Lemire Tostevin's *Frog Moon*." *International Journal of Canadian Studies / Revue internationale d'études canadiennes* 16 (Fall/Automne 1997): 165–72.
- Shields, Carol. *Unless*. Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2003.
- Simon, Sherry. *Le Trafic des langues*, Montréal: Boréal, 1994.
- . *Gender in Translation. Cultural Identity and the Politics of Transmission*. London: Routledge, 1996.
- Taylor, Kate. *Mme Proust and the Kosher Kitchen*. Toronto: Anchor-Random House, 2003.

———. Personal interview. 27 July 2004.

Tostevin, Lola Lemire. *Frog Moon: A Novel*. Dunvegan, ON: Cormorant, 1994.

Woodsworth, Judith. "Aladdin in the Enchanted Vaults: the Translation of Poetry." *The Aux Canadas Issue: Reading, Writing, and Translation*. Spec. issue of *Textual Studies in Canada* 5 (1994): 105–15.

———. "Quelques fragments d'une théorie de la traduction : Paul Valéry traducteur." *Mélanges à la mémoire de Jean-Claude Morisot*. Spec. Issue of *Littératures* 21–22 (2000): 245–63.