

Annie Brisset: *A Sociocritique of Translation: Theatre and Alterity in Québec, 1968-1988*. Translated by Rosalind Gill and Roger Gannon. Toronto/ Buffalo/London, University of Toronto Press, 1996, xxii + 238 pp.

Despite the limitation of its focus to a period of just twenty years, the present study is ambitious indeed. It seeks to explore the ideological regulation of the activity of translation in a specific context (Québécois society between the end of the Quiet Revolution and the Meech Lake Accord), not for its own sake as a chapter in the history of literary mediation, but rather as a model of the relation between translation and social discourse in general. In so doing the author adopts a broadly systemic, descriptive approach in which translation is conceived as a target-culture determined “discursive formation, rule-governed like any other discourse” (p. 4). The norms of such discourse, eminently discernible in the “displacements” which characterize all translation, are studied both from an institutional and a transfer-oriented point of view. The object of the investigation, the emergence of a dialectal theatre repertoire in Québec, is especially suited for such a purpose on account of the pressures to which it has been subject as a minority form in search of an authentic identity. The book’s essential argument is that, in its search for a repertoire to represent the Self, theatre in Québec has constantly defined and redefined its identity in terms of the Other, the Foreigner (the Anglo-Canadian or French), to which it stands in a dialectical relationship. In an apparent paradox, the Self invents itself in and against the foreign text, which serves an ultimately instrumental purpose in the emerging discourse of national liberation.

The first chapter of the book “The Foreigner in the Theatrical Institution” lays the basis for the following account by establishing a “double corpus” (p. 9), consisting of the translations published in Québec during the period under investigation (barely fifteen in number) and of the far more numerous translated productions (some 250, approximately one third of the entire repertoire). Statistics show the distribution of source languages and authors in relation to previously dominant French works, and Brisset discusses both how the institutional apparatus selects and markets texts for translation/performance and the processes by which imported texts are systematically naturalized. Literary developments are

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placed in the context of “the pattern of political events and... the prevailing nationalism” (p. 51).

More detailed consideration of this latter issue provides the backbone of the rest of the study. Brisset identifies three modes of translation which encode the relation to the Other. To each of these she devotes a clearly-structured chapter drawing on a plethora of well-selected examples. “Iconoclastic” translation (Chapter 2) promoted, in the earlier stages, the emergence of a specifically Québécois theatre through deformation, imitation and parody of foreign models, moving in the grey area between original creation and translation which is commonly called “adaptation”. Strategies employed by authors range from deformative translation (Germain’s *A Canadian Play/Une Plaie canadienne*) through reactualization (Michel Tremblay’s *Le Gars de Québec*, an adaptation of Gogol’s *The Government Inspector*; Maillet’s *Le Bourgeois Gentleman*; Ducharme’s *Le Cid maghané*) to outright parody (Ronfard’s *Lear*, Marchand’s *Les Faux Brillants de Félix-Grabriel Marchand*). Brisset sees the unorthodox nature of such assimilative processes as an important step in the destruction of the Other, a process necessary as a prerequisite for the emergence of an authentic new canon.

“Perlocutory” translation, on the other hand, (the term refers to persuasive or injunctive functions) is a propagandistic mode. Brisset demonstrates its potency through an extensive examination of Garneau’s Québécois relocation of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. The many devices by means of which the original is transposed serve to transform it into a cipher of the Québécois struggle for liberation, an ideological reshaping which goes hand in hand with an axiological one. Shakespeare thus becomes a “Québécois nationalist poet”, and Garneau’s text shows striking affinities with committed Québécois writing of the time. In a society searching for an identity, such perlocutory modes remotivate original material, foregrounding an ideological component in the interest of political didacticism. Literature, the discourse of social representation, is inseparable from the idea of nationhood.

The final chapter enquires into the emergence of a new Québécois vernacular, which was ultimately to acquire the status of a literary language. This is a further, decisive step in the process for re-territorialization, mirroring contemporary political demands and instigating

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inevitable institutional conflict. As the “invention of a native language” (p. 195) designed to dislodge the foreign hegemony of official bilingualism, it also represents the final step in the concealment of alterity which stands at the centre of Québécois attempts to develop a discourse of liberation. Once again, aesthetic particularity and the struggle for political independence go hand in hand.

The above summary of the essential matter of Brisset’s book hardly does justice to the elegance and cogency of her arguments, nor to the sensitiveness with which she analyses her chosen examples. Bringing to bear historical, sociological and poetological analysis, her study traces and explicates the emergence of a liberated theatrical discourse through the process of translation. As a socio-discursive practice, translation by definition implies engagement with the Other, an engagement which is full of tension and is rarely linear. It is Brisset’s achievement that she has succeeded in uniting the diversity of translational phenomena within the framework of a coherent argument. This is an exemplary case-study of the socio-discursive manifestations of translation practice which will provide a fund of methods and ideas for all those interested in the place of translated material within emerging literatures.

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