

DANIEL CANTY / Ma translation

“Language is a virus from outer space.”

—William Burroughs, *Naked Lunch*

Until I underwent my own translation, I thought the future was dubbed.

In French my mother tongue, the term *translation*, borne of geometry, is feminine. It connotes the harmonious displacement of a figure, whose component parts—lines, summits, angles—all follow the same pull. Once here. Now there. Across the equanimous eternity of the Cartesian grid. I was born a metaphorical boy, and at the end of the 20th century, as the digitally loaded year 2000 beckoned with its intimations of the near future, I left my native suburb near Montréal and moved to Vancouver, on the left coast of Canada, and the heart of Anglophonia, to meet *Canty*, the inner Irishman to which I owed my patronym, and *become my own man*, as common parlance would have it.

Although *translation* finds an echo in specialized English usage, it can never be equated with *la traduction*—if *une translation* can become *a translation* as it crosses the official boundary of Canadian language, one solitude remains whole: *traduction* stays *une*, or becomes *a translation*. I was first made aware of this troubling asymmetry at an early age, upon my initial prolonged exposure to an actual foreign tongue, in my provincially requisite fourth grade English class.

Some say that English is an alliteratively inclined language, whereas French, with its alexandrine intricacies, is metaphorically prone¹—I am certainly poetically-inclined, and suggest that we accept this image as truth, however fleeting, and let our reasoning proceed from there.

Most of the English I knew growing up reached us with a delay, like the light of dead stars. The glow of TV screen opened up luminous tunnels in our suburban living rooms and basements. Cartoons, science-fiction shows, A and B movies from Britain or the United States were invariably dubbed for the benefit of French-speaking audiences by invisible (perhaps even beret-wearing) heavily-accented comedians from across the Atlantic. Only the *Flintstones*, stalwart defenders of archaic family values, spoke with our accents, bolstering our prehistoric hopes for linguistic independence. *Wabawabadoo, cher Fred!* Imaginative Québécois children,

1 Jacques Roubaud, writer and mathematician, provides a lengthy proof of this argument in *La vieillesse d'Alexandre* (1978).

intent on learning of their place in the world, suffered a double detachment. On the one hand, our colonial co-dependents reaffirmed their symbolic hold on the lost *Empire français d'Amérique du nord* by muffling the din of English under a veneer of *bon parler*, to their cultural and commercial advantage, as had always been their wont. On the other hand, talented lip-readers amongst us could train themselves to detect, under the evident otherness of the events brought to our wondering attention—hot rods and starships, faraway planets and wheat fields, E.T.s and hot gals...—fragments of a secret message, trying to break through the language barrier of images. ABC, CBC, CBS, and NBC, the alphabetically-abridged Anglophone stations of the 13-channel pre-cable days,² combined with the outdoors conversations of my West Island neighbourhood, provided half-decipherable subtitles for my wonderment, and I stalwartly attempted to splice together their dispatches with the *afterimages* of Dubland. Had I already intuited that the truest, or at least the most *stylish*, storytellers were also linguists of a kind? I thought of course, that my own consciousness was central to the plot, and looking back on my musings with writerly distance, I am drawn to conclude that these TV offerings were not true images but *afterimages*, thus wending my way back into the story. In French, *dubbing* translates as *doublage*. Placing myself at the center of an *Invasion-of-the-Body-Snatchers*-like plot could explain my creative confusion—my favourite actors, affirming their secret humanity in the midst of borrowed fictions, were trying to warn me of an impending menace: the language of the future, and of the world at large, was nothing like my own, and a vast conspiracy threatened to leave me hanging outside the precincts of real life, *lip-reading afterimages of tomorrow in the suburbs*.³

Alas, like many a sensitive suburban basement boy, I nourished my anguish by thinking that *L'Histoire, avec sa grande hache*,⁴ had severed us from the main

2 At the time, there were only three French channels, which we referred to by their numbers, *le 2* (Radio-Canada), *le 7* (Télé-Métropole), *le 8* (Radio-Québec). Stations 5 (Quatre-saisons), a very commercially-minded canal, and 9, a loose alliance of community televisions, affirmed the victory of local arithmetic over the bandwidth.

3 It helped that Donald Sutherland, who played the starring role of the last victim, and whom I once sighted buying running shoes for his youngest at Sports Expert, hailed from Montréal.

4 Georges Perec's pun, in *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* (1975) translates, literally, as *History, with its great axe*. I cannot help but think that the loss of the *h* has something to do with the sustained absence of that letter in my spoken English usage.

plotline, and that my *play was set nowhere*.⁵ Succour came in the form of my fourth grade English teacher, Miss P., who hailed from Poland. She sported plaid skirts and an extravagantly plumed hat. Monolingually inclined flunkies, attempting to justify their poor academic performances, often complained that she was not a *native* speaker of English, and that her accent, *really*, was as hard to understand as theirs, and as funky as her clothing habits. Time is fearsomely symmetric. Its parenthetical echoes split through silent infinities. On the left coast, I landed a job with a Polish contingent of designers, who understood my linguistic predicament well, but tended to stay home, close to the families they had invented for themselves. I was far from my own, and more outgoing. At various social *soirées* in the outer reaches of Anglophonia, I would again and again have to answer to the same tautology concerning *le français de France* and *le parler québécois*. A venturesome guest, apologizing for his imperfect education, would underline his incapacity to understand my *original* language, complaining that the federal government's diphtongual edict had set the ground for a permanent national misunderstanding. He or she knew that we Quebecers did not speak *le Français de France*, but a bastardized North American variation, which made it so much more difficult to agree with governmental proclamations of our officially-shared second nature. I would answer my federal interlocutor, with well-meaning nasally-inflected outrage, that, since the ships landed and abandoned peasant riff-raff and a throng of mail order wives on this shore, we evolved at a safe distance from the edicts of the Académie and remained closer to *la langue de Rabelais*, that 16th century thought-party, than the French were, and punctuate my statement with another sip of wine and perhaps a handful of peanuts.

Translation is a beautiful test of tolerance, stretching language to its acceptable limits. Recently, after delivering a reading in Toronto, I caught myself answering a querying poet that *English is not a foreign language*. Mine lacks an *h* of course, but there are no thoughts of translation in my [h]ead as I use it. You will never know for sure, but I can assure you that my consciousness is laden only with itself as I address you. *Ma translation* is a step to the side, to a place where I can steal a sideways glance at my doubles, and the home where I came from, unknowing. I now know that the future was not dubbed: that is only a metaphor, and we are out of time.

5 I borrow the formula from Alfred Jarry, who sets *Ubu-Roi* (1896) in "Poland—that is to say, nowhere."