

Within New Worlds: Some of the Difficulties and Challenges of Translating Two
of Pierre Nepveu's Literary Essays

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ABSTRACT

Within New Worlds: Difficulties and Challenges of Translating Two of Pierre
Nepveu's Literary Essay

Cybèle Lanthier

This project provides a translation of two of Pierre Nepveu's essays taken from his book *Intérieurs du nouveau monde* published in 1998. The translation is followed by a commentary that outlines some of the difficulties and challenges that his work presented in the translation process. The work involved in translating these essays not only required effort at the level of the text itself, but also meant delving into the literary corpus on which the author based his ideas. The readings and research involved prior and during translation affects the syntax, word choice, and overall voice of the text in the receiving language. Translation involves much more than a simple transfer process and requires relying on a wealth of background work that engages the translator as a reader and as a writer. Pierre Nepveu's essays are filled with literary references and information that proves to be interesting and multifaceted reading.

To Aidan, Mariana and Carlos and my Father

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Is Void our Vocation?

This is the story of a young, single woman who writes poems, in the middle of the 19th century, in a newly settled, crude and disorganized small town, as pioneer towns ordinarily were. The young woman is named Almeda Roth. She was born in Kingston, the former capital of Upper Canada, but her father, a harness and leather-goods shopkeeper, reader of Shakespeare and the Bible, moved his family out "West," that is to Lake Huron and the Meneseteung River region in 1854. Almeda's brother and sister died very young from a fever, and her mother, tormented by grief, survived them by only a few years. Her father finally slipped away in his sleep twelve years later, so that Almeda, who had never married, was to live the main part of her life as a recluse in her family house.

Almeda is a sensitive, delicate woman, who lives in an environment unfavourable to culture. Her celibacy further accentuated her isolation. The local newspaper, the *Vidette*, was fond of gossip and miscellaneous news. No matter how much the paper insinuated the possibility of a wedding between the young woman and her newly settled neighbour, Jarvis Poulter, an oil prospector turned salt merchant, all this was just conjecture, based on the fact that he would sometimes accompany her to church on Sunday.

One Saturday evening in summer, a big commotion can be heard coming from the disreputable part of Pearl Street, the working class street that runs behind Almeda's house and which her garden gave onto. Two shrill voices -

that of a man and a woman fighting - soon detach themselves from the general uproar and moved towards her house. A fight broke out and the woman, tattered and bloodied, is left for dead close to Almeda's garden fence. Almeda, who witnesses this from her window, is paralysed with fear by the whole scene. She runs to tell her neighbour Jarvis of the tragedy that has just taken place. They discover that the beaten woman is not dead or even seriously hurt, she is more than anything else completely drunk, and, with a bit of help, manages to stagger home. This scene was pivotal to the story as a whole: the scene shows a spike of violence which is immediately defused, and tinted with discreet eroticism, for never until that moment had Jarvis Poulter been so attracted to his neighbour, who was in her nightdress her hair loose about her.

For her, however, this episode marks instead the beginning of a more resolute and definitive withdrawal. During that same night, she suffers from a particularly heavy and painful menstrual period, and she decides to leave a message on her front door telling Jarvis not to bother calling on her the next morning, since she is not feeling well enough to go to church. Her body as well as the whole familiar universe - its noises and its concrete things - take on a new intensity for Almeda. She sits, in the grip of insomnia, until daylight, drinking tea and listening to the least noise: the tick tock of the clock, the drops of grape juice falling into a basin that she has set up in the kitchen to make jelly, and later the steps of Jarvis Poulter coming up to her door, and then fading away.

It is not that she is starting to lose her mind or even that something within her has broken. Rather, she is experiencing the birth of an extraordinary receptivity that is literary in nature, since immediate sensations are transforming themselves into necessity, into words, and into a desire for poems. Almeda even imagines "one very great poem that will contain everything," (Munro, 1990, 70) not only in what she sees and hears, but in a thousand images of a real or imagined world: the trees and the birds, angels in the snow (her brother and her sister dead years earlier), the mental universe of Jarvis Poulter and even, much further back, the legendary voyage of Champlain on Lake Huron going up to the mouth of the Meneseteung river.

"Meneseteung": this aboriginal word provides the title of this admirable short story written by Alice Munro, which at the same time becomes the metaphor for a poetic stream, a verbal flow born from the violence of the world and from the vigil of the mind. At the very beginning of the story, the narrator evokes the bygone days of Almeda Roth based on old issues of the *Vidette*, all the while describing in detail the collection of poems, *Offerings*, that she finally publishes in 1873. That book, we understand at the end, contains many of the images and scenes the young woman imagined during the long hours of immobility that followed the scene of nocturnal violence. In this collection, we find, notably, a poem entitled "*Angels in the Snow*" and another on the fictive voyage of Champlain, "*Champlain at the Mouth of the Meneseteung*." Yet another poem describes the flora and fauna of the region, while the last presents a list of

the plants imported from various corners of Europe to emphasize the Canadianness that resulted from this mixture.

* * * *

Published in *Friend of my Youth* in 1990, Alice Munro's short story brings us back to a universe which we have little difficulty recognizing, that of the New World and its small pioneer towns at the frontier of civilization, with their gravel roads, their improvised and disparate constructions that make them look like "encampments" (54), and their communities of new arrivals, who have in common only youth and the ambition to succeed. Many of them, or their children, will set out again, going further west, further into Ontario and all the way to the Prairies. That world was rich with promise and possibilities, but it was also fundamentally disorganized, uncertain, dangerous even, with its absence of traditions and solid rules. Almeda and her neighbour Jarvis live on a respectable street, Dufferin Street, whereas Pearl Street, whence the vulgar and angry couple would emerge, plunges into a marshy zone that was no doubt beautiful, seen from Almeda's window under the hazy morning sun, but which also indicate the extreme social and moral desolation that threatened every new town.

The references to Champlain and the flora transplanted from Europe give this story mythical or archetypal shading. The same is true, though less explicitly, of Almeda's family status: the tragedy that took away her family has made her an orphan and her subsequent celibacy only confirms this state. Like

many American heroes, she thus faces the new reality that surrounds her alone. At the same time, she obviously has nothing of the adventurer, and in this sense she is not only a contemporary but also a cousin of Emily Dickinson, even if her small town has a form and conventions much cruder than those of Amherst, Massachusetts. We are not in New England or in Kingston, a city that already has roots and traditions, but in a sort of "Frontier Town," at the edge of Canadian civilization, which explains Almeda's insecurity and fear. As she grows old, she will become marginal and eccentric, treated at best with tolerance, at worst with sarcasm by her fellow citizens.

With a refinement characteristic of her art, Alice Munro, has not suggested any explicit link between her heroine and Emily Dickinson. However, each of the six sections of the short story begins with a quatrain which functions as an epigraph that allows Almeda Roth's poetic voice to be heard. The poem at the beginning of the fifth section displays obvious affinities with the style of the American poet:

I sit at the bottom of sleep,
As on the floor of the sea.
And fanciful Citizens of the Deep
Are graciously greeting me. (Munro, 1990, 68)

These "Citizens of the Deep" are doubly significant: this figure in capital letters reminds us of the way Emily Dickinson had of magnifying ordinary reality, by using striking imagery. Moreover, in creating an oneiric community associated with dreams and the maritime world, the poetic world was conjured

up as a veritable answer to what was precisely most problematic in the little town in which Almeda lives (though not by choice): the idea of citizenship, of belonging to a common order and destiny. Besides, this town, described in great detail and with great realism, does not have a name in Alice Munro's story, and only her local newspaper, which does have a name, makes this area exist as an entity. The newspaper is at best held together by a jumble of trivial events, gossip, and conjectures: the *Vidette* [where we perceive the etymology of "voir" (to see)] is the faithful though narrow-minded newspaper of a town that seeks to define itself as a real town, with its diverse lives and its inevitable deaths, and with its still uncertain civic life that has to be roused on occasion with advice and warnings, as for example those addressed with a touch of humour to Jarvis Poulter, who should not use the public tap or pick up loose coal fallen along the railway track without offering compensation in the form of free salt to the municipality and to the railway company.

In this little world on the margins of an immense and still barely known and poorly inhabited space, a world without cowboys, Indians, or heroes of any kind, Almeda Roth writes a poetry that her very name, with its initial and final 'A', seems to symbolize. Her experience has something of the Borgesian Aleph where the very big, the multiple, the Whole is unfurling in the very small, in a room where she remains motionless and as if in rupture with the world. The bitterness of this emerging society, the vulnerability that such bitterness provokes in a woman alone, and the prudishness that she experiences in the

face of life's realities: all this nourishes an acute perception and a fervent imagination that allows her to take everything in. No doubt Almeda's only book, *Offerings*, is not the unknown masterpiece of a literature in the making. Almeda herself in her preface modestly declares that poetry was for her an alternative to embroidery for which her hands were too clumsy. But no matter, these poems of a fictitious author invented by a prose-writer at the end of the 19th century speak of the force of a literary motif of which we have seen other examples: that of an America not embraced with abandon and lived as an exalting even ecstatic adventure, but rather experienced from a fragile subjectivity, an America often folded in upon itself and its own intimate universe. This very resistance to the natural continuum and to a space of salvation made it possible to seize the world in its vivacious, and at times stunning otherness: here was the birth of a culture, of a spirit, in the very midst of the chaos of a poorly structured and disunited reality. Admittedly this culture was the product of an isolated woman whose father read the Bible, Shakespeare and Edmund Burke, and nothing suggests that it will become generalized. And yet we could also conclude that if Alice Munro invented this 19th century Almeda, it was to note both an origin and a filiation; she writes today in a little town in the same south-west Ontario area (in Clinton, on the road between Stratford and the shores of the immense Lake Huron.) The narrative finds its source in a poetry of space and time; it provides a kinship between two authors while developing itself as the archaeology of a collective

memory, a discreetly ironic archaeology that measures the distance between the world then and the world today. In this respect, the reference to "Canadianness" at the beginning of the story is important. It designates a particular way of living in the New World, somewhere between Kingston and the Prairies, in an anonymous little town where a solitary woman discovers she is a poet.

* * * *

An inevitable question comes up and has often come up: can "Canadianness" be fundamentally distinguished from "Americanness," or is it a barely distinguishable form of Americanness? Obviously this question does not leave Alice Munro indifferent, though her style and intellectual universe oppose the militant nationalism that brandishes an identity or a flag. In another short story in *Friend of my Youth*, "Hold Me Fast, Don't Let Me Pass," we read the following conversation which takes place in a bar in Scotland between a regular and a Canadian from Ontario, Hazel, who has just crossed the Atlantic to visit the old village where her now deceased husband had lived and had had a mistress during the Second World War:

"So have you come over here looking for your roots?" he said. He gave the word its most exaggerated American pronunciation.

"I'm Canadian," Hazel said quite pleasantly "We don't say 'roots' that way."

"Ah, I beg your pardon," he said. "I'm afraid we do that. We do tend to lump you all together, you and the Americans." (79)

The Scot, however, quickly forgets Hazel's remark, and the same day, in a conversation taking place over supper on the popularity of frozen foods, he again consider her as an American, without paying the least attention to another correction ventured by the increasingly weary Canadian.

The very banality of the topics in question (the pronunciation of a word or eating habits) does not make Hazel's affirmation of identity insignificant because it is apparent that her insistent clarification - "I am Canadian (and not American)" - has a more general and profound scope, though never clarified. Yet if Alice Munro shows sensitivity to this question of identity, treating it with a discreet irony - English Canadians are North Americans who must always remind the world that they are not Americans - in no way is this explicit point of view manifest in a short story such as "Meneseteung," despite the botanical allusion to a certain "Canadianness." What Almeda Roth's story makes one aware of is a more distinctive way of envisaging the world of our origins and our pioneers, a way characterized by reserve and modesty, by a violence kept at arm's length while giving rise to both fear and a movement of creative interiorization.

So far I have emphasized that such a relation to the New World is far from being absent from American literature, and we cannot reduce it to pure epic, to the grandiose affirmation of energy drawn from nature. The Whitman model of a sublime and pan-psychic occupation of space is seriously counterbalanced (as pointed out by novelist Joyce Carol Oates) by an inverse

movement of interiorization, of going deeper into the "mind" and place, especially where writers of New England and more generally of the North-East are concerned. The affinities, albeit discreet, that Alice Munro's story sketched between Almeda Roth and Emily Dickinson seem to suggest at the same time that there is no radical opposition between a certain type of relation to the New World in Canada or in the United States, and all the more reason if we examine the issue from a feminine perspective. Evidently this relationship is not surprising if we consider women throughout history but also more broadly the history of North-East America and of the triangle made up of New England, Lower, and Upper Canada. These regions are separated by more or less solid political boundaries (and for Lower Canada a linguistic boundary,) but they also present a number of affinities - religious, sociological, and cultural - and between these regions there was an important movement of population.

Yet there is something in Alice Munro's short story (as there is moreover in the rest of her work) that illustrates the best of a tradition that was strongly asserted by writers and critics wanting to show the existence and specificity of a Canadian literature in relation to an American one, or squarely opposed to it. For example, as early as 1943, Northrop Frye evoked in an article (later published in his classic *The Bush Garden*) the great Whitmanesque current in the poetry of our southern neighbours, and tied Whitman to poets such as "Sandburg, Lindsay, Jeffers or Macleish," (137) only to then characterize Canadian poetry by opposite traits:

Nature in Canadian poetry, then, has little of the vagueness of great open spaces in it: that is very seldom material that the imagination can use. One finds rather an intent and closely focussed vision, often on something in itself quite unimportant. ¹

Note that this characterization was made possible by the fact that Frye, a critic of great scope and immense culture, consciously or not reduced all modern American poetry to Whitman and his inheritors while ignoring the problematic and often critical relation that some of the best American poets of the twentieth century have entertained with the poet of *Leaves of Grass*, such as Frost, Stevens, Crane, Williams and many others.

In fact this reductive view of American poetry allowed Frye to shed light on the colonial character of Canadian literature, which had evidently not known, any more than Québécois literature, the remotest equivalent to Walt Whitman. Canada's political history is such that withdrawal, interiority, modesty, and conformity have become, not a tradition, but a veritable illness, the symptoms and modes of which Frye studied in 1943. Does this not also suggest that American poets, who experienced liberty early on, are healthier? In other words, they fully assumed and accepted exteriority and nature? Here Frye became complex not to say complicated. What's more, he asserted that political emancipation and maturity have not given rise, as far as Americans are concerned, to a greater poetic maturity. He especially warned Canadian poets against "two North American monsters" (135) that they will have to kill once free from the colonial condition. These monsters, or more precisely these

"dragons," were the clichés of newness and youth, and of the dictatorship of nature. These two dragons were close relatives. Being young and new was a cliché implying that you had to spend several centuries cutting down trees and building roads before attaining the era of leisure and culture. The dictatorship of nature proclaimed, as Mephistopheles did to Faust, that one must embrace life anew and directly, not through the intermediary of books and culture.

No doubt the apparent confusion in Frye's proposal when referring to Americans was less revealing as a fault in logic than it is of a necessary identification process, one that uses the other for contrast even at the price of a few contradictions. Not only that but Frye's proposal seemed to be evidence of a knot situated at the very heart of the North American experience and of the never ending virulent debate that this experience arouses between nature and culture. We could account for this knot, or this double constraint, in the form of two propositions:

1. America, as space distinct from Europe, represents nature and vital energy, which Europeans failed to take on because of fear, timidity, Puritanism, and a retreat into the self; this inadequacy in the face of a powerful and absolute requirement (who can really be *against* life?) was the distinctive illness of the North American being.
2. Yet, this call of the wild, this offering of raw life was the great North American illusion, and led very often to a loss of all interiority and to a naturalism or primitivism that were disastrous aesthetically. Nature was

not a given to the writer or the artist, and one must make a detour through literary works, through the past and therefore also through Europe, to tell about "real life" in the New World.

With great lucidity, and now dealing with North American poetry overall, Frye summed up this tension in two words that translated "two irreconcilable views of literature" (136), one which wants poets to be *original*, and one which wants them to be *aboriginal*, or "native" if we want to avoid this term. Frye noted that any originality implied a return to the origins, in other words, to the past, to the ancient poets, which meant that North American poets were never the "natives" that they wanted to be, unless precisely succumbing to the naturalist mirage that leads the poet down the road to ruin.

Without underestimating in the least the Canadian difference, not to mention the Québécois difference (which I will get back to,) we cannot fail to see at this level a certain number of convergent experiences. We saw that William Carlos Williams considered the American individual as sick, dying, handicapped by a Puritanism that prevented Americans from being equal to life's tremendous demands in the New World; in the same breath, Williams nevertheless criticized Whitman, an anti-puritan par excellence, for his excessive naturalism and primitivism.

In Québec, this North American "knot" was fully manifest in Saint-Denys Garneau and the group of *La Relève*. In his letters to André Laurendeau on July 6 and 11, 1931, Garneau pointed to a powerful natural setting: a virgin

Laurentian landscape of "extraordinary force" (1967, 45) which called for the birth of a "new man" (1967, 14) and which fell under perception, or of "feeling" (1967, 15) rather than "literature" (1967, 16). And yet, over the years, Garneau would come to perceive himself as increasingly incapable of embracing life, guilty of distance, of retreat, of inadequacy, and guilty, precisely, of "literature." It goes without saying that the interpretation of this adventure suggested by Jean Le Moyne, and at the same time by F. Scott Fitzgerald, was interesting from that perspective: the acceptance of life in its totality was posited as a norm that Garneau failed to reach. Yet, still according to Le Moyne, Fitzgerald's literary and human destiny told us that openness to life, this typical and tyrannical North American requirement, would lead straight to disaster unless there was a nourishing return to books and European sources.

In short, even if the "disease" (134) Frye diagnosed in 1943 while observing the Canadian imagination, was mainly, according to him, due to Canada's colonial position, a larger dimension cannot be dismissed, one in fact suggested in Frye's thoughts on America. There existed a point of convergence where this "disease" (Frye, 1971, 134), this "morbidity" (Lemoyne, 1964, 228), this "agony of self-realization" (Williams, 1967, 109) found a common ground: early European settlers botched the New World adventure; they did not respond to its open call, and grave, even deadly, suffering was the consequence of this failure. From this perspective, Puritanism, Jansenism, and colonialism appeared as successive or partial explanations of the same affliction identified

in rather different contexts. This affliction was always paradoxical because the doctor or the observer asserted that the mistake consisted of not having known how to answer the call of nature and life, but they hasten to add that to answer this call body and soul was also an offence against the mind. One must both yield to and resist the grandiose exteriority that America offered: a difficult position where perhaps only a slight space was cleared, a place of writing and imagination.

In light of these thoughts, one can better see how Alice Munro's short story can awaken quite a mythical horizon. Does Almeda Roth, single and a poet, suffer from this disease of the New World? Is Almeda too timid to take a chance, to simply *live* in her little town that trails off into a swamp, at the frontier of civilization and wilderness? She could have married her entrepreneur neighbour, let her own body bloom, have children, embark upon this grand adventure which could have perhaps brought them even farther West, as it did so many others.

Almeda suffers from those minor ailments, which single women frequently complained of in another era: she suffers from frequent and persistent insomnia, her eyes sting and her joints hurt. Her doctor prescribes some pills and gives her the typical advice to read less and get married (the narrator notes ironically in passing that the doctor prescribed most of the same medications to married women...). Yet Almeda is not depressive or desiccated, and by describing this world of pioneers from the point of view of this single,

slightly hypochondriac woman, Alice Munro gives her position of withdrawal a creative value. In the house, an intimate and separate place, Almeda becomes an uprooted person who can just as well make an inventory of the flora and fauna of the New World, as imagine what she has not seen, from her familial past to another of Champlain's explorations. No doubt an heir of the Loyalists and the Puritans (though her family name also mysteriously suggests some Jewish ancestry, specifically from two great Jewish American writers of the 20th century, Henry and Philip Roth), Almeda turns her modesty into strength and her conservatism becomes a personal and original route towards the exterior world, reinvented through a keen sense of observation and focus.

* * * *

Northrop Frye's article, written following the publication of an anthology of Canadian poetry, *The Book of Canadian Poetry* by A.J.M. Smith, illustrated just how the American reference was important in the affirmation of a typically Canadian imagination. This reference was complex, distorted, and consisted of many dimensions. On the first level, it simply showed the desire of Canadian writers, as well as post-war Québécois writers, finally to emancipate themselves from the European motherland, a rupture that would henceforth find its primary justification in the awareness of a different space, of a different "tellurism," to borrow a word used by Gaston Miron when speaking of Québécois poetry.

Falling into a romantic view of the New World was out of the question. By criticizing the clichés of the young and the new, Frye wanted to relativize the idea that the Canadian writer of the Americas was deprived of a past and a tradition. In a passage where he mentions Canadian poets such as Lampman and Pratt, but also Octave Crémazie, Frye suggests that it was not so much the rupture with the tradition of the motherland, or more broadly Europe, but the loss of a "linear sequence" (136), of a necessary, neat and significant, configuration that characterized the writers of the Americas (after all, books and the classics were just as available to the writer if he or she were in Paris or London, an affirmation that would, however, require some nuance in the Québec prior to 1960.) Writing in America was to find oneself not without tradition, but before *all traditions*, as if in front of a market or a chaotic bazaar, a "kaleidoscopic whirl with no definite shape or meaning" (136). France, England, Europe were not absent, but appeared now as arbitrary, contingent, multiple. Hence a bit of fantasy as far as cultural references were concerned, as well as a playful liberty which Frye found examples of in Pratt and in the Jewish Montreal poet A.M. Klein, but which could also be extended to a number of other writers in the Americas, very different from each other, from Ezra Pound to Borges, from Saint-John Perse to Julio Cortázar or Réjean Ducharme, from Carlos Fuentes to Robertson Davies and Hubert Aquin. Playful styles and collages, pluralistic and ironic references, bulimia or confusion of cultures: does this not give the Borgesian figure of the Aleph a

resonance so typically American? Sitting alone in the corner of a room as if the world had become empty and absent, and feeling all things unfurl, all histories, all cultures, jumbled together - a catastrophe of the imagination and erudition, a wonderful arbitrariness of traditions. There was always an imminent risk in the New World of uncontrolled cultural enthusiasm, a panic over this "enumerative function" the role and forms of which André Brochu demonstrated in the modern novel and which would merit one day an American chapter². It is revealing that under Alice Munro's pen, a woman discovering herself a poet in a world of pioneers reached the same conclusion, and received in a room within a closed house the multiplicity of things and histories - the names of flowers, and the thoughts of Jarvis Poulter, including reminiscences on the Bible, on Shakespeare, and on Edmund Burke, the literary heritage passed on by her father.

* * * *

I now arrive at the second level where the American reference was manifest, this time in a resolutely adversarial manner. As seen with Frye, the community of North American destiny made room for the affirmation of difference. Canadian interiority was opposed to American exteriority (the United States), timidity and conformity to liberty, the victim mentality and of the colonized to the spirit of affirmation and conquest. Here we must appropriately answer this burning question: how can one be North American without being *American*, to break literally with England without falling into the

arms of the poetic or romantic models of the United States? We can easily understand how this dilemma arose with particular acuity in English Canada and strongly inhibited any euphoria for Americanism; any recourse to this concept was even less distinct in Québec where there was no precise literary model to measure up to.

Yet a certain Canadian response was all the more interesting because it intersected with a process that has played an essential role in the invention of modern Québécois literature. It consisted of turning the failings of the imaginary not into qualities but at least into creative sources, making the little, the small, the almost nothing, a space for writing. On this level, Northrop Frye's *The Bush Garden* was the cousin of Gilles Marcotte's *Une littérature qui se fait* where a hardly glorious and rather sickly literary or poetic tradition, a heritage of the "interior exile" (1968, 91), of the "creative schizophrenia" (Frye, 1971, 133), and the congenital condition that resulted in a difficulty to take shape and to embrace space and life, were as many traits that were not categorically condemned and rejected, but rather perceived as a true and specific condition, and better yet, as a history to assume, to explore, and to write about. Here the Canadian or Québécois imagination found its own configuration; from these hardly engaging beginnings, literature became thinkable and possible, not only in the future but also retrospectively.

At the turn of the 70s, such a reversal struck a sensitive chord in writers such as Margaret Atwood and Dennis Lee, who, following Frye, asked the

American question from a Canadian viewpoint, and more specifically from a Torontonion one. From a political and economic perspective their anti-Americanism was notorious, and Lee in particular denounced the stranglehold of the United States on Canada in *Civil Elegies* with almost as much vigour as Paul Chamberland did when he decried "the Yankee hydra" or the "Big Brother jackass" in *L'afficheur hurle* (71). Even more noticeable, and richer from a poetic standpoint, was how much the negative themes which Frye spoke of - timidity, prudishness, fear, victimization - served once again to express, with some exaggeration, a *difference* between Canada and the United States, and allowed the reinvention of an experience of the New World proper to Canada characterized by what Margaret Atwood called "paranoid schizophrenia," (1970, 62) as opposed to American megalomania which she mentions in the afterword of her collection of poems *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*.

By poetically rewriting the adventure of a pioneer leaving England in 1832 to settle with her husband in Upper Canada, Atwood wanted to reconstruct from the inside this Canadian mental illness, and to attempt the archaeology of an arrival and a settlement. Here we are again in Almeda Roth's era, in the same fledgling society, still shapeless, except for the fact that Susanna Moodie really did exist and wrote accounts of her experience as an immigrant and a pioneer, one of which, *Roughing it in the Bush*, is a classic of the mid-19th century. Atwood freely draws inspiration from this book, by conserving certain

key moments, but also by giving the whole adventure a much more intimate and subjective turn.

The Journals of Susanna Moodie, published in 1970, poetically captured moments of consciousness that have been dragged out from the subjectivity of her familiar world. During the great cholera epidemic that ravaged Lower Canada in the years 1830 to 1840, the immigrant briefly lands in the City of Québec and compares herself to "a word/in a foreign language" (1970, 11). The New World presented itself to her as "a large darkness" and she adds "it was our own /ignorance we entered" (1970, 12). This pioneer's adventure was one of a de-centred self, invaded by uncontrollable and disorderly forces, which found expression, so typical of Atwood, in the very shape of the poems, with their staccato style, their nervous reflexiveness, as if they had been hallucinated. Susanna Moodie, as well as Marie de l'Incarnation and many others after her, must endure the real, but also profoundly symbolic, hardship of damaging fires, one of which completely destroyed her house. "I, who had been erased/by fire, was crept in upon by green," (1970, 26) Atwood then describes in a poem how Susanna discovered herself more vulnerable than ever to nature. From that moment on she must turn away from this wild and turbulent fallow land, in order to find refuge in a city (after having lived "in the bush," Susanna Moodie settles in Belleville, on the shores of Lake Ontario.) Wilderness now revealed itself in a series of dreams where vegetables grow in a bloody, anarchical fashion, and where the apparition of a bear in the night produces

terror. Susanna Moodie now only inhabits an intimate world, the world of her own cramped, aging body, and that of her family, of her children (one of her sons drowns) and her grandchildren, while on the outside the new arrivals are "day and night riding across an ocean of unknown/land to an unknown land" (1970, 33).

Was not this whole destiny simply diminishment and shrinkage as a result of a complete lack of domination over the milieu? No doubt this would result in a certain literary contradiction because to choose to make Susanna Moodie speak through fiction was not only to give her a voice, but by the same token to enter into the logic of conscience and being, and therefore also of permanence. In fact, the last part of the collection constructed, so to speak, the immortality of the pioneer, and established her perennial subterranean consciousness. In her old age she already sees herself "eaten away by light" (1970, 48), an image that conjured up both disappearance and access to the supernatural. Then, having become deaf and senile, having arrived at the last stage of shrinkage, and conscious of her own "puckered mind/scurrying in its old burrows" (1970, 49), she imagines herself as a heraldic emblem, an "uncorroded" gold bird (1970, 49).

Even underground Susanna Moodie will not die. This permanence is not, however, a triumph, or the mythical and monumental advent of a founding figure: this is the permanence of ambiguity, of a love-hate relation to the country, of an unresolved conflict between the soul and progress. Beneath the

cities that were starting to resemble real cities, beneath Kingston and Belleville, and especially in the underground, and the vast space that was Toronto, glinting with glass and steel, the immortal voice of Susanna Moodie still speaks about nature, and paradoxically, about disappearing. In the end, having become an old woman on a bus, she whispers to her fellow citizens words that conclude the book:

Turn, look down:
there is no city;
this is the centre of a forest

your place is empty (1970, 61)

A surprising ending to settlement in American territory: in this new country, the city exists and does not exist.

* * * *

In the first of his *Civil Elegies* published in 1972, Dennis Lee wrote "... we have no notion of what we might have come to be in America" (34). What is striking with Atwood and Lee, both direct inheritors of Northrop Frye, was the insistence and the intensity with which "Canadian interiority" - interpreted as withdrawal or retreat in comparison to "American exteriority" - was itself poetically dragged towards radical devastation. "Your place is empty," suggests Susanna Moodie in the ear of Torontonians, and Dennis Lee begins one of his *Elegies* with this question: "Among the things which/hesitate to be, is void/our vocation?" (43), an echo, barely distorted, of Saint-Denis Garneau's question: "Have I the vocation for poverty?" (133). The term "vocation" has a

religious connotation and also the unexpected avatar of the "admirable void" invoked by the mystic voice of Marie de l'Incarnation. Such a link with New France and its religious figures was not a given. In *Survival. A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, Margaret Atwood ironically asserted that in some way, THE Canadian poem was *Brébeuf and his Brethren* by E.J. Pratt. In 1943, Northrop Frye admired this long narrative poem that seemed to him exemplary of the Canadian experience in the New World, and that tells of the evangelization of the Indians by the Jesuits, beginning with father Brébeuf at the head of these events to the final massacre and destruction of the Huron nation (Pratt, 1940, 57). What can be more Canadian, Atwood asked ironically, than the story of a "French Catholic priest killed by the Indians, as seen by a white English speaking Protestant Canadian from Newfoundland³?" (1972, 93).

Nourished by the reading of *Relations des jésuites*, Pratt's long poem was much more than an edifying story, nor was there an equivalent in Québécois literature. Atwood, in Frye's footsteps, insisted mainly on the sanctification of the victim and on the relation to a hostile environment (nature, Indians) which Pratt's poem typically attested to. A vocation of suffering, a vocation of void, and from there the long ancestry of the Canadian New World took shape up until the present, in other words the beginning of the 1970s. At the end of the road was the great city, Toronto, which rose in all its splendid and prosperous vacuity, Toronto where the voice of Susanna Moodie survived and where Dennis Lee lived, in front of the two beautiful semi-circular towers and the

arches of City Hall, in order to think about the amazing destiny of his fellow citizens on American soil.

Among all these new, small, dusty, or muddy cities that were built in Upper Canada, Toronto (the old York), was the most successful and most resembled an American city. Dennis Lee used the city as an echo chamber, a place of consciousness from where Canadian history and an entire vast space could be conceived and imagined. "The continental drift to barbarian normalcy frightens me," (49) he confessed from his perfectly situated central place: the old theme of "barbarism" (1966, 37) in America and the democracy of the uncultured, the symptoms of which Tocqueville had already uncovered. One would think that the Toronto area where the poet had taken up residence, with its elegant architecture, its sculpture by Henry Moore (*The Archer*), the courteous and quiet way of passing citizens stopping in front of it then returning to their occupations, would constitute enough of an answer to this barbarity. But to simply oppose order to an anarchical space was not in the least enough for Lee, because this place was essentially unreal, artificial, empty. From this point of view, one could not take refuge in an aesthetic of the immediate, of the here and now, where things and people shine by their presence. Historical consciousness spoke too much of failures, of lives unlived, of space unoccupied, and any serene, contemplative, and sedentary existence would be deceptive.

In a text presented during the *Rencontre québécoise internationale des écrivains* and developed further at a later date, Lee explained how he had come to write the Torontonien elegies based on his reading of George Grant's essays on what distinguishes the American mentality ("conquest of what is") and the loyalist mentality ("reverence for what is") (Daymond, 1985, 509). Lee set forth, in a striking description, his poetic project: "...perhaps our job was not to fake a space of our own and write it up, but rather to speak the words of our spacelessness. Perhaps that *was home*" (Daymond, 1985, 513-514).

Lee's gamble in his long poem was to transcend such a description and to make it the base for a poetics and a culture. Here Toronto shone with the glamour that only negative theologies can produce. The "vocation of void" was reflected in the very mirrors of the skyscrapers, but the lyrical discourse that assumed this vocation gave it a transcendent twist. This source became strong enough to make a familiar figure reappear: none other than Saint-Denys Garneau, the "master of emptiness" (Lee, 1972, 45) turning to "sainthood," (Lee, 1972, 53) a distant yet close companion, and through this ill-fated kinship the possibility for the poet to "come to [him]self" is born (Lee, 1972, 54).

The strength of this rhetoric was due partly to the fact that it exuded a kind of counter-Americanism, a negative messianism incarnated in such figures as Brébeuf or Saint-Denys Garneau. That this mythology relied on a simplified, and often caricatural vision of the American experience was probably inevitable, but this mythology also told of a desire in the New World to find a

true language, one that sticks to this adventure from the standpoint of the most profound and alienated interiority.

¹ Northrop Frye, "Canada and its Poetry," in *The Bush Garden. Essays on the Canadian Imagination*, House of Anansi, 1971, p. 137-138.

² See André Brochu, *Roman et Énumération. De Flaubert à Pérec*, Éditions Paragraphes, Université de Montréal, Département d'études françaises, 1996. It is evidently not a question of claiming that the American novel is *more* enumerative than the European novel (can one be more enumerative than Pérec?), but more a question of exploring the particular modalities and functions of enumeration in the literatures of the New World.

³ Margaret Atwood, *Survival. A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, Anansi, 1972: "In a sense, *Brébeuf* is the all-Canadian poem: it's about a French Catholic priest killed by the Indians, as seen by a white English-speaking Protestant Canadian born in Newfoundland" (p.93).

⁴ This text was published in English and entitled "Cadence, Country, Silence," in *Liberté*, "L'écriture et l'errance," Rencontre québécoise internationale des écrivains, No 84, December 1972, p.65-88. The rewritten and more developed version was used here, and was published in *Towards a Canadian Literature: Essays, Editorials and Manifestos, Volume 2, 1940-1983*, Douglas M. Daymond and Leslie G. Monkman (dir.), Tecumseh Press, 1985, p.497-520.

Small Works

Another recluse from New England, Emily Dickinson, was a contemporary of Hester Prynne's inventor. "She lives within me, somewhere," Jacques Brault wrote, "I love her. I do not know why or how." And then looking at Emily's Dickinson's picture on an American stamp, he recognized his own mother: "This woman who hardly had an existence, from whom I learned the forbidden difficulty of language, reclusive poet of daily prose, Emily looks like her, yes, she has the stillborn face of one in love, that of my mother, Émilienne who loved me so much - despite herself, despite me" (133).

In an unfortunately rather sentimental play, *Émilie ne sera plus jamais cueillie par l'anémone*, Michel Garneau described Emily Dickinson as "cousin of the squirrels." Charlotte Melançon, who knows her more than anybody, has been working for years on translating her poems, to render in French these admirable words, so simple and so noble, with their archaic capitals, and in their halting verse, punctuated with dashes. Here is an example of her work:

On apprend l'Eau par la soif
Et la Terre par les Voyages en mer —
La Passion — par les affres
Et la Paix — par les récits de guerre —
L'Amour — par la Mort
Et les Oiseaux par l'Hiver.
(Dickinson, 1992, 31)

Water, is taught by thirst.
Land — by the oceans passed.
Transport — by throe —
Peace — by its battles told —
Love, by Memorial Mould —
Birds, by the Snow.

The Ontario poet, David Donnell, dedicated a poem with erotic overtones to Emily Dickinson, where she can be seen, usually so sober and prudish, though also sometimes daring, haunted by all kinds of horses that toil and stamp and get

excited. In a more peaceful and metaphorical phase, she herself described a moment of her world where the "The Silence tied/His ample – plodding Steed" (1960, 548).

She still exerts a fascination on the scale of these images, apparitions as unexpected as they are astounding, arising from the very centre of an apprehended and always imminent death, and that seem indissolubly linked to the great secrecy in which she kept her life and her work in her white house in Amherst. She was neither mystic nor condemned; she chose - no one really knows when or why - to live a hidden life. She did not travel nor did she go to town, and at times she even refused to come out of her room to meet some of her most cherished correspondents, such as Samuel Bowles, the editor of the Springfield newspaper, whom she seemed to have liked, but who had to insult her from the bottom of the stairs, yelling that he had not made the trip just to come up against such rudeness, before she decided to appear.

The next day, to those visitors she occasionally dismissed, she would send a beautiful letter, punctuated with precise maxims and with sentences of absolute poetry. "I dwell in Possibility – / A fairer House than Prose –," (1989, 184) she wrote one day, she herself only knowing definitions of poetry which were images. The "House of Possibility": pure poetry, coming from her own head, from her body, her room, the family household, and also the ultimate abode - the tomb - often imagined in her poems as a new room where life would carry on with the sound of discreet conversation. In the "House of Possibility,"

the least detail becomes sign and symbol, everything gleams and intoxicates, and everything speaks of the motionless adventure of thought toward an already present eternity, emerging in all things, waiting behind every door.

This "House" was not just a figure of speech; it was also a real residence in Amherst, made of red brick with square paned windows and a colonial porch. It still exists today, a few kilometres from the highway, alongside Main Street, five minutes from the central *common*, a large square bordered by a church, elegant shops, restaurants and bookstores. In the Sunday afternoon sun, in the middle of summer, nobody is around and the square seems empty, but it is possible to stroll in the open garden and to sit on a bench beside a large bank of flowers and listen to the silence that still trails in the dry heat of the pines, and in the shade of the giant oak which must be at least a century old.

Here was where the secluded woman filled countless pages of poetry that she then put away in drawers and chests and which others would read with an astonished eye after her death. Such is the place, the perfect *station* where Emily Dickinson's very voice now only barely reverberates as if she had found her true silence and her repose in the flowers and things that have survived her. One has no sense if this world is new or very ancient, if it is vast or infinitely small. Like Henry David Thoreau, who spent several seasons by a pond in Massachusetts finding in himself and in simple work, the time to exist, Emily Dickinson also believed that there was only one infinity: within (soul, mind, desire.) And she had already formulated, in her inimitable accent, the credo later to be that of

William Carlos Williams, and which he would sum up in the following way towards the end of his life: "A new world is only a new mind. And the mind and the poem are all apiece" (1967, 76.)

* * * *

She decided to write as if she were "nobody," (1959, 75) from the Void [("Nothing" – is the force / That renovates the World – (1989, 290)]. She confided in Abiah Root, her childhood friend, that what she loved above all else was "...the timid soul, the blushing, shrinking soul; it hides, for it is afraid... (1959, 239), and she found it strange to note that as we grow, "we grow still smaller" (1959, 239) in order to better enter the afterworld. This was another version of the biblical metaphor of the eye of the needle, the only true door to the infinite. But Emily was both the eye and the needle, and it is by threading her way within herself that she attained the light:

The Missing All, prevented Me
From missing minor Things.
If nothing larger than a World's
Departure from a Hinge,
Or Sun's extinction, be observed,
'T was not so large that I
Could lift my Forehead from my work
For Curiosity.
(1989, 244)

Surprising embroiderer! She also was busy weaving and sewing, not just one unique letter, as Hester Prynne did, but all letters, and she also worked to embellish the small, to envelop with arabesques and golden thread some simple

yet limitless words. No, she said, neither the biggest cosmic cataclysm nor the sun's extinction will succeed in making me lift my eyes from my work.

One would think that the resulting poetry was stitched of petit point, of delicate jewels. But here arise unfathomable events, worrisome characters, troubling things, on a stage worthy of a Shakespeare play: "The Apparatus of the Dark," "...the Colossal Substance of Immortality," "Those Evenings of the Brain," a "Starved Maelstrom," of "Continents of Light," "Our Horizon" (1989). From the point of view of the smallest, everything becomes gigantic, and the constant use of capital letters at the beginning of nouns, a form already outdated by 1850, as if written in old English or in German, gives the impression here of precisely that: the infinite discovered through the needle's eye, limitless life seen by the insect, captured by the small soul.

* * * *

Naturally the biggest irony lies in the fact that she was one of the two major American poets of the 19th century. The other was Walt Whitman. In the small town of Amherst, the author of *Leaves of Grass* was not looked upon favourably at all. "You speak of Mr. Whitman. I never read his book, but was told that it was disgraceful," (1959, 7) she confided to Thomas Higginson her favourite correspondent and adviser, and that was the end of the great American bard, of his cosmic self, and of his *libertad*. What would she have thought of the following verse had she read it?

The soul,
Forever and forever — longer than soil is brown and solid — longer
than water ebbs and flows.

I will make the poems of materials for I think they are to be the
most spiritual of poems,
And I will make the poems of my body and of mortality,
For I think I shall then supply myself with the poems of my soul and
of immortality (Whitman, 1936, 15).

"Immortality?" She was constantly thinking of it. And the *Soul* was one of her favourite themes as were other analogous words (*Mind* or *Brain*) that tell of the inner life and the activity of thought. But she was far too dualistic to accept this "soul" as immanent to matter as Whitman proclaimed. Would she have also found, as William Carlos Williams did later, that the great master had panache and inspiration but no form, that his poetry strove to hard to "imitate nature," (1967, 110) and that to be on the side of nature was a terrible mistake on the part of an artist and a poet?

But above style and form, it's naturally the very project that Whitman's poetry brings into play that was foreign to Emily Dickinson, and the very word "America," too oratorical, too grandiose, was absent from her work. Yet here and there in her poems "Voyagers," "Settlers," and still uninhabited "Prairies" appear, and sometimes also Peru or Brazil, distant Eldorados (1924, 8). At some point she says that thirst governs our nature, from birth to death, and she adds that this thirst "...intimates the finer want— / Whose adequate supply/ Is that Great Water in the West— / Termed immortality —" (1989, 204). The verse would become bland and banal if we were to take out the nonsensical geographical

direction - "in the West" - which is tied to a whole literary and spiritual tradition that situated the beyond toward the setting sun¹, but that takes on a new, astonishingly concrete value in the American context.

She completely internalized references to the United States of her time; she went back to the very idea of discovery and the New World, but throwing over it a sort of desolation. In order to cut short the heroic quest of the explorers and discoverers, she resorted to her most formidable poetic weapon: stenography. Working by subtraction, it reduced to nothing the oldest archetype, already formulated in a number of Greek myths such as Jason and the Golden Fleece, where the purpose of a quest by sea always involved conquering a power and fulfilling a destiny:

Finding is the first Act
The second, loss,
Third, Expedition for
the "Golden Fleece"

Fourth, no Discovery —
Fifth, no Crew —
Finally, no Golden Fleece —
Jason — sham — too. (1989, 226)

Finding, losing, in repetition: there is only that, she said, suggesting that all expeditions to another world will only amount to vain attempts at consolation, as many fanciful efforts to forget this alternation of findings and losses that gave rhythm to our existences.

Of all her 1,775 poems, none says it better than the following poem, of how she had appropriated the image of crossing over to the New World only to

completely denature it, in such a way that the destination - this continental land found at the end of the voyage and on which we would remake the world - is no longer important, but rather the interval itself, the vast oceanic and celestial emptiness which we can no longer manage to cure, a lesson from the "Ether," a mysterious and haunting nostalgia:

The lonesome for they know not What –
The Eastern Exiles – be –
Who strayed beyond the Amber line
Some madder Holiday –

And ever since – the purple Moat
They strive to climb – in vain –
As Birds – that tumble from the clouds
Do fumble at the strain –

The Blessed Ether – taught them –
Some Transatlantic Morn –
When Heaven – was too common – to miss –
Too sure – to dote upon! (1989, 46)

Evidently, the recluse of Amherst was part of this "lonesome" community and drew inspiration from it. The strange crossing was nothing more than an illusory memory. Now the "Eastern Exiles" were here, on this side of the ocean, in other words nowhere, busy fighting a down-to-earth battle, not quite remembering the song of the infinite learned along the journey. Not really Baudelaire's "Albatross" despite strong romantic analogies, since the accent was not put on the ridiculousness of a tangled process, but on the desire to find a lost space, immense, celestial, and enchanting.

* * * *

Today, we know that Emily Dickinson not only read "great works of literature," but also edifying books and the somewhat kitsch Victorian magazines of her era. Judith Farr has shown that a whole current of American painting in the mid 19th century took great delight in the representation of angels, virgins, and religious figures, and also presented grandiose landscapes that were sublime allegories of a spiritual experience. For example, *The Voyage of Life* by Thomas Cole in 1840 was widely reproduced in magazines and circulated in households, and consisted of a series of panels representing such landscapes that produced a theatrical view of the stages of life as one approached the divine light.²

Emily Dickinson lived isolated, but informed, in a world that still believed in the myth of the "American Eden" but that was racked with doubt and frenetically looking to spiritualize the prosaic and give the real a supernatural quality, as Walt Whitman did in a very different manner. This was a world that carried within it all the richness and weight of English culture and, more broadly, European culture: this world owned that culture, was imbued with it, and sought at the same time to dissociate itself from it to prove that America could be as favourable a ground for intellect, knowledge, literature, and culture as the Old Country was. This was strongly asserted by Emerson and Thoreau. Whitman lyrically pushes this idea all the way to the typical rhetoric associated with it (but one must not forget that it is rhetoric) that consisted of asserting barbarism in the name of *another* culture, *another* mind, a claim that could be found in Québec and elsewhere in America at various moments in history,

sometimes in a rich and progressive form (as for example with Brazilian modernism and its "cultural anthropophagy"), sometimes in forms much more naïve and degraded.

But no one was less barbaric than Emily Dickinson, and if there was no expedition, no discovery that held up, she seemed to say, neither could there be a rupture. In fact, though she regularly read *Harper's* and *The Atlantic*, she also read the Bible and English literature, from Shakespeare to Charlotte Brontë, through Wordsworth, Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and many others. It seems, however, that she engulfed her classic and European culture within her, within the present moment in which she lived, in a daily life without memory and without name, where she lived a recluse and from where her poems arose.

In fact, broadly speaking, her poetry, sedentary and as receptive as it was to daily rhythm, appeared without past, without memory, and without biography. The voice, so characteristic of Emily, seemed each time to rise from anonymity and be written from nothing. The wonderful and disquieting events that take place in her laconic poems seem without antecedents, looming up from nowhere. When she writes in the past tense (many of her poems use the preterit which is the equivalent of our past tense), it is almost never a question of the real past but rather of the present seen retrospectively, as if from the point of view of the future or the beyond. Often it is as if she were Dead (lucid, quivering, and alive in her death) narrating the episodes of her life or of LIFE. In certain poems, this position is explicit and allows the narrator to tell us of her own death:

I heard a Fly buzz — when I died —
The Stillness in the Room
Was like the Stillness in the Air —
Between the Heaves of Storm (1992, 57)

Between life and death this fly is, for an instant, all that exists, as if an absurd and obstinate boundary. Then the world fades in eyes that can no longer see.

Only the present and the future (but the future of the beyond) are real tenses for this poetry, because the past was "such a curious Creature" (1989, 264) that it is best ignored lest it discharge upon you its "faded Ammunition" (1989, 264). Emily Dickinson's world was without origin, without birth, without causes, and without nostalgia. Whereas Whitman wrote *Starting from Paumanok* to mark clearly his biographic anchorage in Long Island's Amerindian soil, telling of this new beginning that is *his* America, Emily Dickinson on the other hand starts nowhere, just like the great sister-figure that never ceases to haunt her:

Pain — has an Element of Blank —
It cannot recollect
When it begun — or if there were
A time when it was not —

It has no Future — but itself —,
Its Infinite contain
Its Past — enlightened to perceive
New periods — of Pain.
(1992, 70)

As is often the case with her, this "pain" was a messenger, offering a point of view on the world that reminds us of that of the insect. The very small and the very big join in an eternal present that contains all time. Of the absence of

memory and genealogy that is often lived in America with a note of lack and regret, in an amnesia that allows an affirmation of pure spontaneity of a sovereign self, Emily Dickinson, on the contrary, makes this a position of the mind, an "admirable void" that is the very intelligence of the world. She says that she lacked everything; in other words she lacked nothing, nothing unessential or contingent, nothing either that would have made her want a better future, or *progress* on the current state of affairs. The "House of Possibility" she speaks of is not the one that one dreams of building, a house like those of the settlers at the frontier of the civilized world, and which symbolizes the hope of a new life, or even one of those houses belonging to the "New Jerusalem" dreamt of by the first Puritans. This is a house where anything can happen and where everything, in fact, does happen, because conscience lives there, what Emmanuel Lévinas called "the event of dwelling"³ (1979, 153): contemplation in a place separated from the natural continuum, constitution of an inward life, and "separation" as sole grounds for the representation of the world and openness to others.

One thinks of extraterritoriality and uprooting in terms of the absence of a fixed place, roaming, aimlessness, or nomadism. But Lévinas clearly saw that the *dwelling*, one's *home*, the *house* (that he moreover associates with the feminine as a receptive element) initiates, prior to the nomadic, the necessary break for sovereign thought: distance from the "situation," freeing, or adjournment from

instinct and from the soil itself, as paradoxical as that may seem. From that point of view, the house is the first instance of extraterritoriality.

Emily Dickinson's here and now was never the soil: in this land she found herself perfectly uprooted and out-of-territory; she was radically present to the land in the elsewhere of her own thought; she only completely inhabited the world because she was no longer at home in the world and was already situated in the beyond. Her poetic intelligence of the world came from there. It was her poetic intelligence, but it was also that of many who came after her. Many of today's American writers recognize in Emily Dickinson and in her singular experience a pivotal moment in their tradition. Paul Auster comes to mind, *The New York Trilogy* is everywhere marked by the emblematic symbol of the room, and Auster makes an explicit reference to Emily Dickinson's room in Amherst in *The Invention of Solitude*. The novelist Joyce Carol Oates wrote the lines that discerningly sum up the conflict of the two world visions that characterize American culture, especially since the 19th century:

For Americans, the collective belief, the moral imperative, is an unflagging optimism. We want to believe in the infinite elasticity of the future: what we can *will*, we can *enact*. Just give us time! - and sufficient resources. Our ethos has always been hardcore pragmatism as defined by our most eminent philosopher, William James: truth is something that works. It is a vehicle empowered to carry us to our destination.

Yet there remains a persistent counterimpulse, an irresistible tug toward stasis and toward those truths that, in Melville's words, will not be comforted. At the antipode of American exuberance and optimism there is the poet's small, still, private voice, the voice of individual conscience; the voice, for instance, of Dickinson.... (25)⁴

The novelist echoes here a theme that was certainly, in fact and outside any thesis, that of Emily's, but which also corresponded to the preoccupations of the most important intellectuals of her time. As early as 1840, Emerson spoke of the "infinity of man" and Thoreau proposed in one of his most famous conferences that having established the Republic, the *Res-publica*, we must now turn to the *Res-privata* (10). Following Thoreau, Emily herself poetically took up the same theme by once again turning the tale of exploration of the Americas inside out, in this case using the story of Hernando de Soto, the first Spanish explorer of today's southern United States in the 16th century who died of fever with most of his companions in the heart of a swampy, mosquito-infested, country:

Soto! Explore thyself!
Therein thyself shalt find
The "Undiscovered Continent" –
No Settler had the Mind. (1967, 403)

Needless to say, such praise of introspection and of private life, even though it is given here in the metaphoric form of a kind of *interior America*, belongs to all eras and all Western cultures, witness Emerson's dedicated admiration for Montaigne.

But praise for interiority during Emily Dickinson's time also constitutes (the reference to the original exploration of America is eloquent) a decisive moment in elaborating an American culture and literature, and both Paul Auster and Joyce Carol Oates, among others, were very well aware of this. It was not

simply a question of withdrawal into the self from a world where materialism was already entrenched and where the conquest of the West was accompanied by a good dose of often distressing ideological conscience, in particular with all the rationalizations justifying the reduction and annihilation of native cultures. It meant much more: the conditions, the very possibility of an intellectual life, and the capacity of strong and personal thinking in America, and writing that not only transcended observation and description but also epic heroism.

Emerson in this respect had a formula that spoke volumes on the subject of the "sluggard intellect of this continent" (23), an important observation that is echoed everywhere in the Americas, despite important cultural and historical differences. There was the hint that thought was not something self-evident in America. Octavio Paz has aptly shown the role played by anti-intellectualism in Hispanic colonies as well as in the United States. And as far away as Brazil, in a major work retracing the genesis of the Brazilian mentality and culture, the same diagnosis is made, much in the way Fernand Dumont did for Québécois culture: according to Sergio Buarque de Holanda, the idea that talent was a matter of spontaneity rather than of lengthy study is profoundly rooted in Brazil, and Americanism more often than not takes on a nervously edgy, instinctive shape, rather than something that is truly integrated and thought out.⁵

Insofar as America was also a European idea and invention, one cannot ignore the fact that romantic and nomadic 19th century Europe had strongly fostered the idea of an America essentially made of savagery and instinct,

naturally finding its genius in its space and landscapes. But the problem stems from the principal itself, from the project of beginning, or of beginning again, that animated the American experience. In the United States the first puritans defined this project through a determined re-reading of past texts, and notably a patient biblical exegesis. Emerson described how he discovered Montaigne in his father's library by reading John Cotton's translation, one of the first leaders of Puritanism in New England. It shows that there was originally no contradiction between the idea of America's own beginning and that of an intellectual pursuit that assumes European and Western tradition. Immediately, however, some minds object to such a development. Here is the sound of a familiar voice, that of the Mephistopheles in Faust, the voice of a certain romanticism that is still echoed in Quebec. This voice proclaims that the intellect is repetitive, boring, dry, and that any study is inevitably turned toward the past, that intelligence is but abstraction and sterile theory. And that voice called for the great awakening of the forces of life; it demanded exteriorization, spontaneity, energy, the touch of genius, and the natural.

America was particularly fertile ground for such a dichotomous vision of things. Emily Dickinson, as isolated as she was (though she read a lot), belonged to an era that measured itself directly to this problem. In many of New England's intellectuals, the feeling then grew that America must now really begin, but on new grounds - on the grounds of study, attention to the immediate, the intimate, and the subjective, on the grounds of a poetic intelligence of the

world that no longer grasped nature from the outside, but within psychic movements themselves. Whitman, following in Emerson footsteps, spoke of nature in the form of desire, of a pan-psychic occupation that affirms that all matter is spirit and all cosmos subjective.

American nature was not a given, it had to be invented, and created from the self. It was a decisive moment in contrast to what Longfellow wished for - "a national literature commensurate with our mountains and rivers, - commensurate with Niagara, the Alleghanies and the Great Lakes...In a word, we want a national literature altogether shaggy and unshorn, that shall shake the earth, like a herd of buffaloes thundering over the prairies⁶". A project astonishingly close, despite the accent put on a note of violence, to the one formulated by the abbot Casgrain in his most famous text, when he calls for a literature "widely cut, as are our vast rivers, our immense horizons, our grandiose nature" (308). Yet what did Octave Crémazie, estranged from American shores, write to abbey Casgrain? That here "thought has no horizon," that no sooner has "the fire of [the most talented] intelligence" manifested itself than it begins to cool down. From there, what a mistake to believe it enough to go the school of wide open spaces and to mimic its magnificence, whether it was grave or violent, or that it evoked a pious cathedral or a herd of unleashed bison. No, it was not enough, and the problem was not properly posited.

Contrary to Whitman, Emily Dickinson did not believe that thought is a cosmos and that the "I" is infinite, which would amount to the same point of

view as Longfellow via another route. The "small" (small me, small work) was her way of absolutely resisting fusion and everything Dionysian. First, assume privation - there was no discovery, no new shore upon which we landed to be reborn. There was the lack of roots and memory, the meagerness of means, and a space always slipping away and always elsewhere. Everything is a question of habitation: the body is a house for the "soul" and the house shelters the body. "Creation seemed a mighty Crack – /To make me visible –" (Dickinson, 1989, 232): this rift says it better than anything else, where "nature" and the "landscape" were always already lost, the subject shines like a little resplendent light, and feels, without a doubt, an immense pleasure at being there.

Emily Dickinson's staccato discourse answered American unintelligibility with a gust of maxims and aphorisms, signs of her capacity to generalize and distance herself. Above all, she responded with the resolutely allegorical nature of her poetry: realities fit one into the other, making signs one to the other, always meticulously separated, in the same way the dashes articulate her poetry. The visible world, this "mighty Crack" is the allegory of the beyond for the thought that lives there. The realities (Pain, Light, Beauty, and many others) are Characters that animate the theatre of the mind and that delve into the sense of impassible distances - "interior difference." Only there in that incessant process of differentiation can *the Mind* come to be. There is no messianism here, only the multiple figures of a world following its course, pure repetition, pure daily appearance toward the most distant of destinations.

* * * *

Saying that the New World was, in Western, and mainly European history, an extraordinary adventure of modern subjectivity - uprooting, de-centering, separating, testing of another kind, or utopian view of starting anew – is also saying that what we call America is very close to the experience of the "there is" that Emmanuel Lévinas speaks of (1985, 47). *There is*: is "the phenomenon of impersonal being" (1985, 48). Heidegger analyzed the concept of *something is given* from the German *es gibt* where he perceived generosity (*gibt* is from *geben*: to give), whereas Lévinas sees there a test inciting "horror and panic" (1985, 49). For him "there is" is "something resembling what one hears when one puts an empty shell close to the ear, as if emptiness were full"⁷ (1985, 48). It is "existence without existent", "the absence of everything [which] returns as a presence, as the place where the bottom has dropped out of everything, an atmospheric density, a plenitude of the void, or the murmur of silence"⁸ (1979, 46).

America: a dangerous generosity, a deceitful totality, and an immense echo without content. We have left known, marked territory, and we find ourselves as we were before meaning, before the least "interior difference." At the opposite end of Emily Dickinson's writing, there was the frenetic enumeration of Walt Whitman (enumeration, inventory are the privileged, rich and monotonous forms, of a relation to American reality). With Whitman the poem sought, so to speak, to inhabit and to invest in "there is," to transform it into true generosity,

into a fulfilled totality. Whitman's weapon, typically American, was concrete multiplicity, as the only form possible of unity and of a rediscovered meaning. From that point of view, to say that America is one or to say that America is multiple is to say the same thing, because this multiplicity is a cosmos, the poetic expression of an I-universe, a language that has become anonymous and sovereign by including and naming everything. However, an author such as Burton Pyke has been able to show that such poetics has something mythical and compensatory. In his analysis of "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," Pyke, in opposition to the cosmic enthusiasm of the poet, writes a text where the very same Whitman denounces American immortality and lack of culture.⁹ Whitman's artistic achievement was to turn democracy into a poetic theme, into the base of a cosmic language where everything united at the same source and where all realities were equal in rights, and to give the illusion that he spoke of the real America, as it was, when *Leaves of Grass* only offers the dream, the utopian projection, arising from a never admitted degradation.

The strength of messianic ideologies (notably in Quebec and New England) was the very expression of the panic brought on by American openness. Believing that history was already written, that destiny was written in the cosmos or the ancient texts, this implied warding off "there is," sealing off the breach, avoiding the ordeal where separated subjectivity must truly face the "existent," the "Other." By starting from a clean slate, by writing from the Small and from Nothing, from the point of view of Nobody, Emily Dickinson suggests

a route diametrically opposed to that of Whitman's: to really make the world appear as "completely other," not as desire, or as the deployment of an I-universe, nor as a beginning or a "discovery," which implies naming, possession, and revelation, but as a dramatic face to face. In her "House of Possibility," the world suddenly has a face, genuine infinity, a transcendence arising from the very hollow of separation.

¹ Fernand Ouellette wrote at the beginning of a conference: "Our ancestors had this great desire, this great ambition to cross the Atlantic to go West. Seen from Europe, they were, for the most part, people from the West that were going to the mythical West; beings of Sunset, "in" the Sunset. Claudel would have said, he wrote: "Is not the sunset the real homeland?"

² See Judith Farr, *The Passion of Emily Dickinson*, Harvard University Press, 1992. We are so used to considering Puritanism as foreign to our tradition that we forget just how much, thanks notably to the presence in America of the Irish that Puritanism shared with Catholicism, and was nourished by the same iconography and the same myths. The Dickinson family, Judith Farr reminds us, had up to seven Irish servants.

³ Emmanuel Lévinas (1979) *Totality and Infinity*, Boston, Martinus Nijhoff Publisher, p. 153.

⁴ Joyce Carol Oates, "The One Unforgivable Sin," *The New York Times Book Review*, 25 July 1993, p. 25.

⁵ See Sergio Buarque de Holanda, *Raízes do Brasil*, Jose Olympio Editora, 1982.

⁶ Cited by Pierre-Yves Petillon *La Grande Route. Espace et Écriture en Amérique*, Éditions du Seuil, 1979.

⁷ E. Lévinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, Duquesne University Press, 1985, p. 45-47.

⁸ E. Lévinas, *Time and the Other*, Duquesne University Press, 1979, p. 26.

⁹ Burton Pyke, (1978) *The Image of the City in Modern Literature*, Princeton University Press, p. 77-86.

COMMENTARY

Introduction

Pierre Nepveu's *Intérieurs du nouveau monde* offers a fascinating look into the literary beginnings of the New World. Born in Montreal in 1946, Nepveu has been productive on the literary scene since the early 1970s and has an impressive array of publications to his name, including poetry, essays, articles, and novels. He has taught French language and literature in a number of universities across Canada and is currently a professor in the Département d'études françaises at the Université de Montréal. For *Intérieurs du nouveau monde*, he won the Prix Gabrielle-Roy, an award bestowed on the best critical work published on Canadian and Québécois literatures and also the Governor General's Award; he also received the Jean Éthier-Blais award from the Fondation Lionel-Groulx. The quality of the fifteen essays in this collection has aroused keen interest and enthusiastic reviews on the topic of the American experience, which he views as a poetic movement rather than an event inscribed in the familiar notions of conquest.

I have chosen to translate two of Pierre Nepveu's essays: "La vocation du vide" and "Petits Travaux" taken from this collection. Nepveu's work is a challenge for the translator. Not only is his style demanding, but the breadth of his ideas constantly remind the translator that his essays require delving into the depths of each text to plumb what lies below the surface of words. The essays

are inter-textual, relying on many varied writings and sometimes making allusions to other essays in the collection. Long sentences, vocabulary and expressions were also part of the challenge, but in the end, translating these two particular essays was uncannily similar to uncovering the English text within his essays, in large part because the author is drawing heavily on literature in English to make his points.

The Theoretical Focus

The general framework that guided my approach to Nepveu's text was based on the ideas of Antoine Berman in *Pour une critique des traductions* in which he proposes a method for analysing existing translations. Berman offers the translator a framework, a more guided way of approaching a text for the purposes of translation, in which the translator's position, project and horizon are clearly defined. In terms of the translator's position, Berman states that "tout traducteur entretient un rapport spécifique avec sa propre activité, c'est-à-dire une certaine 'conception' ou 'perception' du traduire" (1995, 74). My intention was to pay special attention to the French text in order to avoid what Agnes Whitfield refers to as "infelicities in capturing and transmitting information" (115) and to capture the English voice within these two specific essays. This position is part of a translator's overall project, as described by Berman: "toute traduction conséquente est portée par un projet, ou visée articulée" (1995, 76). In this instance, the main objective was to address the challenges of translating a literary essay, and the extent to which specific aspects of the essay genre have a

direct impact on how the text is translated. Finally, Berman talks about a translator's horizon, a combination of the translator's position and project where the translator's literary heritage plays an important role: "On peut définir en première approximation l'horizon comme l'ensemble des paramètres langagiers, littéraires, culturels et historiques qui 'déterminent' le sentir, l'agir et le penser d'un traducteur" (1995, 79).

Antoine Berman's ideas on translation provided the general framework within which to work, but translating Nepveu also meant taking into account the essay as literary genre. Translating essays from French to English is not a frequently discussed area in translation studies. The work of Agnes Whitfield and Jane Everett attest to the lack of studies on the translation of literary texts. Everett claims that literary works and their translations have often been studied but that this does not hold true when it comes to essays and their translations: "Mais on a peu traité du moins à notre connaissance, de la traduction des discours d'accompagnement, alors même qu'on a reconnu la grande influence exercée par certains de ces textes traduits sur la culture d'accueil" (93). She further states that these types of translations do not seem to leave their mark, as if the texts themselves were transparent and posed no problems to the translation process, and that only very rarely will anyone attempt to determine if the translation was "good" or "bad" (93). Nevertheless, both Everett and Whitfield agree that translating a literary essay falls into the category of a literary

translation and that certain key aspects of the literary essay must be accounted for in the translation.

These aspects include such exigencies as the voice of the essay, the rapport of the author with his text, and the objective of the work. For Whitfield, the overall voice of the essay is determined by syntax, emphatic structures, coherence, and subject positioning (115-121), and particular attention should be given to word order in relating emphasis. Emphasis is key in the literary essay since this is what sets the overall tone, whether it is distant or *engagé* (116). Thus, when Pierre Nepveu writes, "J'en viens à un deuxième niveau où se manifeste la référence américaine, sur un mode résolument adversatif cette fois" (1998, 74), the translation must reflect the presence of the author in the text and resist the urge to become more anonymous, opting rather for a more involved voice.

The rapport of the author with the text is also important and reflects "the more personal, or emotional, commitment of the author" (122). Paramount to the essay genre is how the text flows through the various themes in association with the often persuasive nature of the essay in which the "reader is invited to read" passages in a certain way as influenced by the author's "point of view" (117). This means that dynamism must be maintained throughout the translation to capture the voice and reflect the author's presence. As François Ricard points out, the author becomes part and parcel of the essay:

...je propose de distinguer l'essai de l'ouvrage scientifique par le mode lyrique ou intuitif qu'y emprunte le discours réflexif, c'est-à-dire par la présence d'un JE qui y affirme sa propre et singulière subjectivité.... Dans

l'essai, au contraire règne la subjectivité, qui tend à s'y donner pour l'origine absolue de sa parole et de sa connaissance. 'Je suis moi-même la matière de mon livre,' écrit Montaigne au lecteur (367).

Pierre Nepveu's voice is not easily captured; long sentences and difficult renderings proved especially challenging. However, the process was somewhat facilitated by the mixed corpus on which he bases his analysis. This meant that "achieving the right voice" (Whitfield, 114) was made easier, since it is ultimately the voices of Alice Munro, Emily Dickinson and Northrop Frye among others that the reader hears throughout the text.

Finally, the objective of Nepveu's work is to invite us to re-read the literary canon in another light and to provide a new perspective on English and French literary identity. Jane Everett highlights the importance of the rapport of the essayist with his object of study (in the case of Nepveu, a segment of a literary corpus) and states that their close association must be reflected in the translation: "La traduction qui ne tiendrait pas compte de cette union intime, qui n'y verrait que le contenu ostensible, risquerait d'enlever à l'essai sa raison d'être" (96). In an effort to explore new questions, the literary essay becomes a tripartite interaction involving the essayist, the reader, and the themes elaborated within the text.

The Relevance of Pierre Nepveu's Work

These essays were chosen because they provide interesting insight on literary works of the 19th and 20th centuries from the perspective of both English and French writers. Nepveu pays close attention to the historical moment of

coming to the New World and how writers reflected upon their encounters with a seemingly a-cultural world, while their separation from Europe gave them the distance, both literally and figuratively, to face their culture with more detachment. In this context, writing involved withdrawal, turning inward, and fragility, or as he puts it: "...celui d'une Amérique non pas embrassée à corps perdu et vécue comme une aventure exaltante et même extatique, mais éprouvée à partir d'une subjectivité fragile, souvent repliée sur elle-même et sur son univers intime" (1998, 246).

"Américanité" or Americanness is part of the landscape of literary criticism in Québec and has aroused some debate over its legitimacy as a way of viewing the Québécois experience, in part because of its somewhat ambiguous nature. The theme of Americanness constitutes the general theoretical framework of Nepveu's book. It explains how Nepveu is able to look at a literary corpus made up of writers from Canada, Québec and the United States, through a more attentive reading of authors who write of a different experience of the New World, one that is not couched in the familiar notions of extroversion, naturalism and youth. According to Jean-François Chassay, the word "américanité" became a "mot fétiche" (18) in the 1980s and though various examinations of this notion has had the effect of opening "le champ des intérêts littéraires québécois et d'ajouter au traditionnel axe est-ouest un axe nord-sud" (19), it is a theme that needs to be properly situated. Americanness has evolved into a significant facet of the Québécois identity, and Benoît Melançon points out

the importance of defining it within specific historical and social settings: "L'évolution du rapport à l'américanité s'explique par des circonstances historiques et sociales: l'américanité n'est pas la même selon les époques et selon les classes ou groupes qui la défendent" (68). The concept opens the discussion on literary influences and shows how Québec has entertained conflicting relations with the United States (Chassay, 1995, 21). Often this conflict arises from the tendency to see the United States at the root of the problem of cultural homogenization, something Chassay rejects: "Cette Amérique qui aplanit les différences est partout et l'Occident dans son ensemble en porte la responsabilité" (188). This also explains why Nepveu lets us hear writers whose voices may not be as loud as for instance some more prominent ones such as Walt Whitman.

The collection is divided in three sections, the first one is devoted to "Recluses" (reclusive writers) and looks at the writing of Marie de l'Incarnation, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Emily Dickinson and Laure Conan; the second section, "Poètes" looks at a wide range of writing from diverse authors such as Alain Grandbois, Hart Crane, Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, and texts from aboriginal poets. Finally, the last section, "Villes", is a cosmopolitan space where the voices of many authors can be heard including Margaret Atwood, Alice Munro, Herménégilde Chiasson, Patrice Desbiens, Louise Desjardins, and Paul Auster among others. All these voices speak of another experience of the Americas, one that does not proclaim the strength of the young and the new. This is the position from which some writers wrote, and Nepveu shows how the

resistance on the part of Canadians against identifying with Americans is reflected in the works of writers such as Munro, Atwood, Lee or Frye, but also Dickinson and Chamberland. Nepveu proposes to look at the American experience by reading some of these authors anew, dispelling any ambiguities that may arise from an easy identification with American culture. In "Le poème québécois de l'Amérique" published in *Étude françaises* in 1990 and again in *Intérieurs* in 1998, Nepveu says:

"...l'écriture québécoise semblerait ainsi pouvoir imiter l'expansionnisme américain, créer cet espace imaginaire presque illimité qui incarne pour nous Québécois la culture et l'histoire yankees. L'écriture poétique donnerait au Québec une sorte de continentalisme américain qu'il n'a jamais eu réellement, sauf dans un discours idéologique nourri de fantasmes." (1998, 181-182)

The need for Canadians to distinguish themselves from Americans masks a larger problem that Nepveu views as a "knot" in the North American experience. On one hand European settlers failed to seize the opportunity of living fully within the natural setting of the Americas, while on the other hand the very nature they were confronted with led their writers to believe that simplicity and nature are the chief elements for an aesthetic quality in literature, when in fact European cultural heritage is paramount in understanding their position in the New World. When they could not fully assume the task before them and at the same time build upon the cultures they had left behind, settlers arrived at an impasse.

The notion of "americanité" is looked at from the different ideological contexts construed by Nepveu in each essay: English Canadian writers from their historical perspective, and Québécois writers from their particular rapport with the United States and France. The concept opens up the necessary space or zone for translation - Nepveu's texts are hinged on the inter-lingual heritage of Québécois culture. The translator is at the confluent point of many cultures and must take into account the complex interrelationship between a text and other texts within the matrix of Nepveu's ideas. Language and textuality no longer occur in cultural seclusion and Nepveu's essays position the translator "in terms that are at once textual and social" (Venuti, 1996, 110) and bring to light the "heterogeneity of language" (Venuti, 1996, 110).

Such intertextuality points to "the notion of a complex culture that can never be grasped in its entirety" (Bassnett, 1998, 131) and how translation has moved "towards a notion of cultures in the plural" (Bassnett, 1998, 133). Translation has often been viewed as a way of providing existence and "by extension, identity" (Blodgett, 1983, 18). Translating these two specific essays in Nepveu's collection provides the translator with the necessary tools to do the translation a posteriori, armed with the works of writers such as Emily Dickinson or Northrop Frye, the translator can move towards the main literary corpus contained in the essays, through the prism of Québec literary criticism and the American experience.

As Nepveu carries the reader through the works of many varied writers, he illustrates their interior reflection on their experience in the New World, and he demonstrates the duality of the New World experience in which writers were expected to “céder et résister à l’extériorité grandiose qu’offre l’Amérique: position difficile où se dégage peut-être un mince intervalle, un lieu d’écriture et d’imagination” (1998, 253). This slight space is essentially metaphysical, an interior world which Lévinas would characterize as “the event of dwelling” (1979, 253) an essentially an interior movement, and the necessary withdrawal for writing.

The title of Nepveu's book, *Intérieurs du nouveau monde* sets the stage for Nepveu's premise, how is it possible to live in the Americas and develop an interior life? Nepveu proposes readings that go against the epic, sacred and grandiose tale of an American settlement. In the Americas, a certain amount of literary activity has taken place with a focus on inward space, in opposition to American expansionism and its rule of the self-made man. American mythology celebrates the life force in full flow within inexhaustible nature, a line of thought strongly counterbalanced by many of the writers mentioned throughout Nepveu's essays. This distinction serves as a means for writers to differentiate themselves from their American counterparts within a new framework where the lack of boldness and self-confidence is actually a source of innovation as well as a sounding board for their poetry and literature. The words 'intérieurs' and 'intérieurisation' reflect the specificity of Nepveu's text and his view of how

writing oftentimes takes place. On two occasions, in "La vocation du vide" the word 'interiorization' was used to translate "un mouvement d'intériorisation créatrice," (1998, 248) which became "a movement of creative interiorization" (p. 9) and also for "un mouvement inverse d'intériorisation" which was translated as "an inverse movement of interiorization" (p. 10) both constructions imply travel and transfer from one particular state into another. The concept of interiorization thus reflects a break or a counter-movement to the exteriority of the American experience in its more generalized form. In another instance, Nepveu speaks of the influences of American culture on Emily Dickinson's life (1998, 64), and I chose to use the word 'internalize' (p.34) to reflect the psychological aspect of internalization, which may be a conscious or unconscious act. In "Small Works," Nepveu uses the writings of Emmanuel Lévinas to illustrate the philosophical context of his notion of interiority: "recueillement de soi dans un lieu séparé du continuum naturel, constitution d'une intériorité, d'une 'séparation' seul capable de fonder la représentation du monde et l'accueil d'autrui" (Nepveu, 1998, 69), which became in English "contemplation of an inward life, and 'separation' as sole grounds for the representation of the world and openness to others." Here "inward life" reflects the position of the writer as observer, of the necessary break with the daily events in life that make writing possible. The writings of Lévinas add weight to what Nepveu is proposing. Lévinas shows how "the recollection necessary for nature to be able to be represented and worked over, for it to first take form as a world, is accomplished

as the home" (1979, 152). Lévinas also speaks of "interiority concretely accomplished by the home" (1979, 154), this Nepveu says, gives the creative process the necessary detachment and space.

These two particular essays, "La vocation du vide" and *Petits travaux*," are examples of Nepveu's pilgrimage into diverse literatures. His work guides us through some of the fragile beginnings of North American literature; he shows that journeys through cultural and national differences are embedded in an inevitable subjectivity. Translating Nepveu is not only of interest from a textual point of view but also because of the innovative quality of his work, his encompassing view makes the work all the more worthwhile to translate. The general approach when translating these two essays was twofold: first, the work was done on a more general level, which entailed diverse readings and looking into the content of the essay itself. This helped in the actual translation process, what Berman characterizes as the "caractère immédiat, intuitif de traduire" (Berman, 1995, 78), and secondly on a more focused level, which meant delving into the particulars of the essay, such as tone, structure, syntax, vocabulary and terminology to capture the "artistic unity" of the text (Whitfield, 2000, 124).

Nepveu's Ideas and their Context

In his book *Pour une critique des traductions*, Berman states an important principle underlying the art of translation: "D'une manière générale, traduire exige des lectures vastes et diversifiées.... On traduit avec des livres" (1995, 68). Similarly, in *Intérieurs du nouveau monde* and his examination of what it meant to

write in the New World, Nepveu shows that literary composition usually involved an immersion in the world of books. That these two artistic processes—original composition and translation—are made possible by and shaped by reading has been a guiding principle in my translation of "La vocation du vide" and "Petits travaux." In order to translate Nepveu effectively, I felt it necessary to better understand his ideas, and to do so meant a fair amount of collateral reading, which included such diverse authors as Susanna Moodie, Emily Dickinson, or William Carlos Williams. These other authors helped to strengthen Nepveu's ideas and put them in focus. In Nepveu's view, the New World was experienced not as a beginning but as a withdrawal and as an introspective journey. He finds evidence for this in the poems of Emily Dickinson (who was known as a poet only to a small circle of friends during her lifetime) and in the work of Almeda Roth, a Canadian poet who produced a small collection of poems in 1873 entitled *Offerings*. Their writing was possible because of what they read. External nature, though part of their poetry, was not the main factor which brought their poetry to light. It took a combination of books, inspiration, and inwardness to enable their poetic expression. Such elements have also, I hope, contributed to my translation of Nepveu's work.

In "La vocation du vide" and "Petits travaux," Nepveu's focus is on the small. The historical moment of coming to the New World is seen from the point of view of the individual anguished soul. Nepveu also shows the importance of returning to the nourishing sources of literature instead of basing creative

literary ability on the assumption that it comes from an exterior source, what Northrop Frye characterized as "...first-hand contact with life as opposed to a second-hand contact with it through books," an observation that implies that "the true poet will go into the fields and smell the flowers and not spoil the freshness of his vision by ruining his eyesight on books" (135-136). This, Nepveu says in "La vocation" (p. 12), echoes the advice Mephistopheles gave to Faust, that he should forego erudition, and join in the "joys of sense" and "in the busy world to dwell" (Goethe, 2001, 1300-1320).

Nature, however, is not necessarily the stuff of great literature, and for Nepveu interiority rather than exteriority allows for the necessary distance to write within the context of the New World. The withdrawal, inwardness, and fragility seen in such lesser writers as Almeda Roth in "La vocation du vide," but also in such great poets as Emily Dickinson in "Petits Travaux" are examples of distance, of "frontiers" that have little to do with the actual frontier of the New World. Jane Everett states the importance of the author's object of study in the literary essay:

L'objet sur lequel il réfléchit, et qui le reflète, est le "corpus culturel" de sa société (ou un fragment de celui-ci), qui, en devenant l'objet de sa réflexion, lui permet, de prendre ses distances par rapport à lui-même, pour mieux se reconnaître dans sa totalité (d'où, par ailleurs, les nombreuses anecdotes et citations qui ancrent le discours dans la réalité culturelle (96).

Nepveu's lateral movement through these references is used to reinforce his theory of the small, and his forays through some of the literature at the turn of

the 20th century and also into more recent writers such as Dennis Lee and Margaret Atwood, or philosophers such as Lévinas provide a fascinating and all encompassing tour of a wide range of literary and philosophical writing. Part of the strategy of the essayist is to cite a broad spectrum of authoritative voices in order to be more persuasive (Everett, 1994, 97), what Jean Terrasse would qualify as the "référant interne" (1977, 126). Such a technique is the product of accumulated knowledge, a wealth of literary background. These fragments of stories, philosophical ideas, poems, and other texts are peppered throughout his essays, and the translation must reflect both Nepveu's text and the original works he is commenting on. The readings give the essay its context and help to place them within their larger framework, also providing the necessary distance and putting the work in perspective. As Philip Stratford says, "Translation is, in fact, a privileged, intense reading of an author and a work" (93).

Distance allows the translator to pull back and see what type of choices he or she has made, and why. This distance was often achieved mainly by the simple expedient of setting the work aside and re-reading it at later dates. When translating Nepveu, one becomes acutely aware of how the: "translator must have a global appreciation of the text; must be sensitive to its larger rhythms, to its systems of metaphor and symbol, to the structure of its events, the interplay of its characters and the quality of its language; and must also be aware of its historical and cultural context" (Stratford, 93). Detachment therefore becomes a crucial strategy, one which allows the translation to remove itself from the

original without cutting loose from the tether binding the two texts. Or as Philip Stratford puts it "...translation depends on intimate identification with one's author, yet it depends absolutely on distance and difference too" (99). This double requirement is inherent in the nature of the translation process. The focus required when paying attention to details and the intricacies of the original must be counterbalanced by detachment on the part of the translator, allowing the translation to 'lift-off' from the original text and move within its own context. Reading Dickinson, Munro, Atwood places the translator within the context of Nepveu's essay and allows for a clearer vision of his topics. On a more focused level, in order to be true to the work, certain characteristics of the essay genre had to be taken into account.

Translating the Literary Essay Genre

Jane Everett describes the literary essay as a "texte littéraire polyphonique, opaque et auto-référentiel" (96) and Edouard Morot-Sir defines it as an "exigence stylistique d'abstractions" that offers a "systématisation relative et locale d'idées abstraites saisies intuitivement et en liberté, gardant leur nudité conceptuelle ou cherchant l'enveloppe charnelle des images" (131). Such intuitiveness and resonance in the presentation of concepts and values give the essay its characteristic appeal and offer a special challenge to the translator. The essay writer establishes a personal rapport with the reader, using a strong undercurrent of persuasiveness inviting the reader to share his views. In her work "La traduction de l'essai littéraire," Jane Everett shows how "le faire

essayistique" is an intrinsic part of the text. A translation must reflect this aspect of the essay, taking care not to undermine the structures that make it possible to see the links between the essayist, the reader, and the corpus.

Nepveu focuses mainly on a cross-section of the literary corpus that spans what he refers to as "the triangle made up of New England, Lower, and Upper Canada" (1998, 249), or Ontario, Québec and New England. This wide sweep covers a large cross-section of "hors-texte" (Everett, 1994, 95) with the objective of inviting us to re-read the literary canon in another light. Not only is his perspective broad in orientation and scope, but it also looks at authors under a common light, despite their different cultural backgrounds. The effect, as Gilles Marcotte points out (1998, 97), is one of *Le Pot de terre et le Pot de fer*: "*Ne nous associons qu'avec nos égaux/ Ou bien il nous faudra craindre/Le destin d'un de ces Pots.*" But Nepveu makes his case throughout his essays and moves from his ideas to the texts he has studied, from past to present (the present being the mid-1970s), constantly maintaining the intricate web of his ideas. His sights are on the metaphysical. Nepveu's tone is at once engaging and scholarly, the register of his essays shifts from literary criticism to storytelling to personal anecdote. His reader is well read and capable of following his line of argument. The essayist's attitude and voice are part and parcel of the translation. This sets the stage for the structure, syntax and particular vocabulary chosen to convey his ideas to the reader in a convincing manner.

The Structure of the Essays

Translating an essay meant approaching the text while being mindful of three key factors: the overall voice or tone of the essay, the position of the author vis-à-vis his text, as well as the details involved in syntax and vocabulary.

Poring over the text, and wrestling with structure and vocabulary make up much of what translators do with the texts. The choice of a word, or how a sentence is rendered can often have an effect on the resonance of the text overall. It is when you look at the details and specific choices of the translation process that this becomes most evident. Whitfield defines the voice of a text as "the *mouvement* of the text, its tone, its intention or the effect the author seems to be wanting to achieve on his or her reader, the particular point of view from which he or she is speaking" (114).

In these two essays, Nepveu's *mouvement* is not linear. A broad look at how the essay is put together shows how he strings his thoughts together in a tone which is both erudite and engaging and which is effective in weaving ideas together with stories and poems. "La vocation du vide" begins with the story of Almeda Roth told through Munro's narrative, and of how Roth came to write one small book of poems in her lifetime. Here the setting is the New World, an essentially precarious and undefined environment. As he moves on, Nepveu includes other authors, such as the voice of Emily Dickinson or the story of *The Aleph* by Jorge Luis Borges. He turns to a question that permeates his essays, the idea of Americanness, but from the English Canadian perspective. Enter the

heavyweights such as Northrop Frye, Saint-Denys Garneau, and William Carlos Williams. The effect is one of inclusiveness and unity; the conjunction of these writers and their ideas gives weight to the text both literally and figuratively. Then back to Almeda Roth in her small dusty town where something of a literary nature is taking place, only to loop around to Frye again, this time with backing from Gilles Marcotte, Margaret Atwood and Dennis Lee, and introducing Susanna Moodie via *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* but also *Roughing it in the Bush*, Moodie's own account of her coming to Canada. The essay ends with Dennis Lee and his nod to Saint-Denys Garneau in the *Civil Elegies*.

In "Petits Travaux" the road is less meandering and more tightly focussed on Emily Dickinson. Other authors are used either to highlight an aspect of her poetry or of her appeal even today (David Donnell, William Carlos Williams), or they are used to show what Emily Dickinson is not (Walt Whitman). Her life is paralleled to Thoreau's, since both sought distance from the world in which they were living. The writings of Emmanuel Lévinas illustrate and define Dickinson's inwardness where the room, the house, grant her the necessary space to write. Nepveu's presence in the text is not as explicit, but can be found in the paragraph where he implies a visit to Emily Dickinson's house in Amherst. An overview of the essays gives a sense of how his ideas are conveyed.

The Author's Voice

Nepveu comes across in his essays as a mix of the academic and the personal. His style is distinctive, and his sentences are not only long, but express

his thoughts in a characteristic manner that is both erudite and academic. It is a style both elegant and discursive, bringing the reader to the points Nepveu wants to put forth through deduction. Take for instance the following sentence:

Pour couper court à la quête héroïque des explorateurs et des découvreurs, elle a recours à son arme poétique la plus redoutable: la sténographie, qui fonctionne par soustraction et qui réduit à néant l'archétype le plus ancien, déjà formulé dans de nombreux mythes grecs, dont celui de Jason et de la Toison d'or, où le voyage par mer a toujours pour finalité la conquête d'un certain pouvoir et l'accomplissement d'un destin... (1998, 65)

Nepveu, in a similar way to Emily Dickinson, often uses subtraction to make his point, whittling down his thoughts to their conclusions. He organizes his analytical descriptions around the literary works he has appropriated in the essays, through a series of observations that include the personal, academic and scholarly. He uses different stories, poems and anecdotes in order to insert his theoretical observations within this narrative. His texts involve aspects that include the historical, lexical and contextual aspects of other writings to give more weight to his arguments. As an essayist Nepveu masters the relevance of literary concepts and values, and their relation, and adroitly reveals, by threading the metaphysical and the power of myths (in this instance the myth of the American experience), the sense of awkwardness, of entering into something that was beyond what settlers expected when coming to the New World and that was expressed for some writers in reflexiveness and interiority.

The essayist's identity in a literary essay is often explicit and clear. Nepveu introduces himself in the text by recounting his own experiences.

Although Nepveu often relies on impersonal third person forms, what Jean Terrasse describes as "anaphorisation discursive" (1977, 126): "on ne sait plus," "on pourrait croire", "on pense toujours" (1998, 61, 63, 69) or "il y a," (249) "n'est-il donc que" (259), he is also inviting the reader to partake of his experience. And there is a very personal element to his essays. The tone is set in the prologue when he recounts a trip to the United States where he meets Ron Kovic, author of *Born on the Fourth of July*, and also in his epilogue, where he tells of his experience in Brazil and how he came to adopt two Brazilian girls. In "Petits Travaux," Pierre Nepveu visits Emily Dickinson's hometown of Amherst, recounting the event in the third person and showing how a visit to Dickinson's house invests the notion of dwelling with more than just the simple meaning of residence.

The effect is one of closeness and distance at the same time: the reader can relate to the text on a personal level, but also needs considerable background knowledge to be on the author's level. Nepveu also invites the reader in the form of "nous" to share in his musings: "C'est une voix bien familière que nous entendons là...." (1998, 73). His ideas are entwined and modulated by the many vectors in the essays and from there emerges the adroit interplay between the personal and the impersonal, the reader and the writer. Agnes Whitfield identifies the "relationship of the narrating subject with his or her text and the encoded narratee" as important facets of an essay and how "to neglect such text phenomena [such as word order] in the translation process" can have "negative effects...on the artistic unity of the translated text." (115). This approach, though

commendable, can sometimes be untenable. In the above-mentioned sentence the "nous" was dropped in the translation, becoming "Here is the sound of a familiar voice" though previous versions sought to remain closer to the original in order to include the "narratee." The effect, as for example in the following, is ultimately awkward: "It is the sound of a familiar voice that we hear"/"We hear the sound of a familiar voice."

Finally, what Everett refers to as the "finalité" or the "spécificité" of the essay, must always be kept in mind. The objective of the essay becomes a three-way interaction involving the essayist, the reader, and the text. This reflexive aspect of the essay genre is similar in nature to the reflexive work of translation. However, the essay genre and the translation process itself also force the reader/translator to go further than the text. Working with Nepveu's essays shows how translation reaches beyond and stays within the boundaries of a text. The multi-layered aspects of his essays strain the translation in all directions, weaving in and out of different cultural and literary contexts. An example of this is when Nepveu refers to the Borgesian figure of the Aleph (15) and then describes the resonance of the Aleph as one that is typically American:

Sitting alone in the corner of a room as if the world had become empty and absent, and feeling all things unfurl, all histories, all cultures, jumbled together - a catastrophe of the imagination and erudition, a wonderful arbitrariness of traditions (18).

Here Nepveu is making a direct reference to the story of "The Aleph" written by Jorge Luis Borges, in which the protagonist discovers the Aleph in a basement underneath the stairwell, and where, in fact "all things [do] unfurl":

On the back part of the step, toward the right, I saw a small iridescent sphere of almost unbearable brilliance. At first I thought it was revolving; then I realized that this movement was an illusion created by the dizzying world it bounded. The Aleph's diameter was probably little more than an inch, but all space was there, actual and undiminished. Each thing (a mirror's face, let us say) was infinite things, since I distinctly saw it from every angle of the universe (26).

Having read "The Aleph" helps to follow Nepveu's line of thought, and clearly shows how other voices emerge within his essays. The translation was not only demanding in terms of its inter-textual nature, but also in terms of the sentence; how Nepveu uses his sentences to convey emphasis is often a challenge.

Translating Emphasis

According to Whitfield, emphatic structures are essential elements in an essay (115-121). She stresses the importance of word order in creating emphasis and says both English and French offer a range of structures to choose from. She also warns against the tendency when writing an essay in the English language to give way to a "more distanced, more anonymous tone" (118). There is an inherent difficulty in preserving the appropriate syntactical "tension" when translating Nepveu. Inevitably, the need for "fluency" seems to take precedence. For example, the French sentence structure was often unsustainable in English; many sentences had to be reworked in order to avoid clumsy renditions.

However, a revision proved that at times it was possible to stay in tune with the original's intrinsic qualities. For example, in "La vocation du vide":

Cette résistance même au continuum naturel et à l'espace salvateur permet de saisir le monde dans son altérité vivante et parfois stupéfiante: là se trouve la naissance d'une culture, d'un esprit, au sein même du chaos d'une réalité mal structurée, non unifiée (1998, 246).

Nepveu's point is postulated after the colon; emphasis is expressed with "là se trouve," and this type of structure was maintained if at all possible in English:

This very resistance to the natural continuum and to a space of salvation makes it possible to seize the world in its vivacious and at times stunning otherness: here is the birth of a culture, of a spirit, in the very midst of chaos of a poorly structured and disunited reality (7).

Yet other sentences were revised to put the main focus at the beginning rather than at the end:

Admittedly this culture is the product of an isolated woman whose father read the Bible, Shakespeare and Edmund Burke and nothing suggests that it will become generalized.

Whereas in the French version, the main clause concludes the sentence:

Rien ne prouve, certes, que cette culture va se généraliser: elle est le fait d'une femme isolée dont le père lisait la Bible, Shakespeare et Edmund Burke (1998, 246).

Other examples where sentences were re-structured for the purpose of providing a smoother translation include the following:

Dans sa petite ville qui s'effiloche vers un marécage, à la frontière de la civilisation et de la nature sauvage, Almeda est-elle trop timorée pour faire le saut, pour *vivre* tout simplement: épouser son voisin entrepreneur, laisser son propre corps s'épanouir, avoir des enfants, entrer dans cette grande aventure qui les conduirait peut-être encore plus loin vers l'ouest, comme tant d'autres (1998, 253).

Is Almeda too timid to take a chance, to simply *live* in her little town that trails off into a swamp at the frontier of civilization and wilderness? She could have married her entrepreneur neighbour, let her own body bloom, have children, embark upon this grand adventure which could have perhaps brought them even farther West, as it did so many others.

The general expectation when translating toward English is to produce a text that reads well and does not jar the reader. As Annie Brisset notes: "Traduire, c'est ajuster sciemment ou inconsciemment le texte de départ au discours autorisé qui lui correspond dans l'espace récepteur. Sinon, le texte d'arrivée restera lettre morte" (112). As far as these essays are concerned, a rigid strategy throughout did not seem to be the best strategy to adopt; some passages called for more intervention than others, and it proved more felicitous to be open and flexible.

"Petits Travaux" also offers examples of problematic sentence structure:

La fascination qu'elle exerce est à la mesure de telles images, qui sont autant d'apparitions inattendues et renversantes, surgies du milieu même de la mort appréhendée, toujours imminente, et qui semblent indissolublement liées à l'immense secret où elle a tenu sa vie et son œuvre, dans sa maison blanche d'Amherst (1998, 60).

Such a sentence could have been translated as:

In her white house in Amherst, she still exerts a fascination on a scale of these images. Images that are apparitions as unexpected as they are astounding, arising from the very centre of an apprehended, and always imminent death, that seemed permanently linked to the great secrecy in which she kept her life and her work.

Though a final revision produced the following:

She still exerts a fascination on the scale of these images, apparitions as unexpected as they are astounding, arising from the very centre of an apprehended and always imminent death, and that seem indissolubly linked to the great secrecy in which she kept her life and her work in her white house in Amherst.

Re-readings of the translation revealed these problems in their acuity. Areas that proved awkward or discordant when read were re-worked to provide a smoother, more fluent and readable text. The translation takes on a life of its own; this is when the text itself becomes more autonomous from the original and when modifications are made to reflect more common practices in English. Here is another example of how revision altered the translation:

L'aventure de la pionnière est celle d'un moi décentré, envahi par des forces incontrôlables et désordonnées, ce que traduisent la forme même des poèmes, leur style hachuré, leur autoréflexivité nerveuse et comme hallucinée, si typiques de la poésie d'Atwood (1998, 258).

Initially, the main point was put at the beginning of the sentence and was related in the passive structure "ce que traduisent la forme même des poèmes":

The very shape of the poems, their staccato style, their nervous reflexiveness, as if hallucinated, and so typical of Atwood's poetry, translates this pioneer's adventure into one of a de-centred self, invaded by uncontrollable and disorderly forces.

This structure highlights the characteristics of Atwood's poetry at the expense of the pioneer's adventure, which is relegated to the background.

This pioneer's adventure was one of a de-centred self, invaded by uncontrollable and disorderly forces, which found expression, so typical of Atwood, in the very shape of the poems, with their staccato style, their nervous reflexiveness, as if they had been hallucinated.

Reworking sentences to create flow affects coherence in the English translation, and though flow is often a crucial factor, respecting the inflexions of the original was also important. Coherence is affected by word order, but it also relies on how the text flows through the various themes in association with the

often-persuasive nature of the essay. The objective was to maintain the dynamism of the ideas and to find the English voice within the text. On a more targeted level, words, and which ones to choose, offered some interesting solutions.

Choosing the Right Words

The many layers of Nepveu's text affected word choice throughout the essays. In "La vocation du vide" Nepveu's reading of Munro's story brings focus and depth to his essay. Some of the language and terms used to translate Nepveu reflect these readings. For instance, when one of the characters, Jarvis Poulter, a salt merchant, is chastised by the local paper for picking up loose coal and using the public faucet by the railway, the translation uses the words "salt merchant" and "public faucet," (p. 6) thus reflecting both Munro's short story and Nepveu's text.

Furthermore, some passages from the story are paraphrased in the essay, and the translation becomes a re-telling of segments of the narrative. For example, when Almeda is distraught after having witnessed a violent scene on the street, Munro describes her as follows:

She pours out a cup while the tea is still quite weak and adds to it several dark drops of nerve medicine.... The grape pulp and juice has stained the swollen cloth a dark purple. *Plop, plup*, into the basin beneath.... She is there when the gate is opened and a man's confident steps sound on her veranda.... Then the footsteps go the other way, down the steps. (68-69)

Nepveu describes the scene as follows:

Prise d'insomnie, elle reste assise là jusqu'au jour, à boire du thé et à écouter le moindre bruit, le tic-tac de l'horloge, les gouttes de jus de raisin qui tombent dans un bassin qu'elle a installé à la cuisine pour faire de la gelée et, plus tard, les pas de Jarvis Poulter qui s'approche de sa porte, puis s'en éloigne. (1998, 242)

The essay paraphrases this passage so that the translation ends up combining both the original story and Nepveu's account of this story.

She sits, in the grip of insomnia, until daylight, drinking tea and listening to the least noise: the tick tock of the clock, the drops of grape juice falling into a basin that she has set up in the kitchen to make jelly, and later the steps of Jarvis Poulter coming up to her door, and then fading away (2).

This retelling of existing of stories and ideas gives the translation the sense of a "book [that is] already in English. Just the words are in French" (Homel, 48).

Other difficult word choices had more to do with plays on words such as the passage where Northrop Frye speaks of the inherent problems with North American poetry:

Avec une grande lucidité, et en traitant cette fois globalement de la poésie nord-américaine, Frye résume cette tension en deux mots qui traduisent "deux points de vue irréconciliables sur la littérature: celle qui veut que les poètes soient *originaux* (original), et celle qui exige qu'ils soient *aboriginaux* (aboriginal)" ou, si l'on tient à éviter ce néologisme, "aborigènes" ou "autochtones" (1998, 251).

In the French, Nepveu uses the words "originaux" et "aboriginaux." With "aboriginaux" Nepveu is using a neologism, an aspect of the text which is lost in translation. It does not make much sense in the English since there is no reason why the English translator would want to avoid the term "aboriginal" unless to avoid any confusion with aboriginal people and their writings.

With great lucidity, and now dealing with North American poetry globally, Frye summed up this tension in two words that translated "two irreconcilable views of literature" (136), one which wants poets to be *original*, and one which wants them to be *aboriginal* or "native" if we want to avoid this term (p.11).

The word "native" could be meant to include Europeans and their descendants now living and writing in the New World, though this may be somewhat ambiguous in the translation.

In *L'épreuve de l'étranger*, Berman claims that "la traduction est déjà présente dans l'œuvre," referring to the potential that most texts have for translation and how the translation becomes "a tissu de traductions" (1984, 293). With Nepveu's essays this potential energy becomes concrete reality. Just as his essays are clearly inter-textual, so too is the translation, as Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere point out in *Constructing Cultures: Essays on Literary Translation*:

Of course Emily Dickinson's poetry is startling and wonderful and we call it 'original,' but although she may have been something of a recluse, Emily Dickinson had read all sorts of texts and fragments and echoes of all she read drift through her poems. We can trace literary echoes in the works of all writers. In the same way, no two translations are going to be alike, as we all know, because fragments of our individualistic readings will drift through our reading and our translating. Difference is built into the translation process, both on the levels of the readerly and the writerly (27).

This idea of translation as a process by which existing literary material is recreated reminds one of the *Antropofagia* movement in Brazil in the 1920s, when the cultural elements disseminated by hegemonic powers were assimilated rather than rejected in order to better represent the country's multi-faceted

society. Nepveu alludes to this movement in "Petits Travaux" and also in other essays throughout his book.

The Originals and Some Inconsistencies

To offset American hegemony, Nepveu emphasizes retreat in "La vocation du vide" and "Petits travaux", relying on women writers to show a different current in American culture. He translates some of Emily Dickinson's poetry himself and also draws on other translations by Claire Malroux and Charlotte Melançon. Tracing these translations back to their English source was at times difficult. The task was made additionally challenging because Dickinson's work in English has itself been tampered with by various editors. A 1924 edition of *Selected Poems of Emily Dickinson* leaves out the now famous hyphens which, as Nepveu insists, are as vital to her poetry as her capitalized nouns. In some instances the very words of the poem are different depending on editor and date. Consider, for example, the difference in the following poem between *Selected Poems of Emily Dickinson* of 1924 and *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* of 1960:

I heard a fly buzz when I died;
The stillness round my form
Was like the stillness in the air
Between the heavens of storm (1924, 223)

And:

I heard a Fly buzz – when I died –
The Stillness in the Room
Was like the Stillness in the Air –
Between the Heaves of Storm –

The Eyes around – had wrung them dry –
And Breaths were gathering firm
For that Last Onset – when the King
Be witnessed – in the Room –

I willed my Keepsakes – Signed away
What portion of me be
Assignable – and then it was
There interposed a Fly –

With Blue – uncertain stumbling Buzz –
Between the light – and me –
And then the Windows failed – and then
I could not see to see – (1960, 223-224)

The last sections are omitted in the 1924 version along with the hyphens, and some of the wording is different in the first stanza.

Editions were also important in tracing the work of Dennis Lee. When he links the work of Lee to that of Saint-Denys Garneau, Nepveu draws on the 1972 edition of Lee's *Civil Elegies* in which the references to Garneau are explicit. The 1972 edition was a re-write of the 1968 version, and there are significant differences. After he published his poems in 1968, Lee experienced a long period during which he was unable to write, when "words were clogged with sludge" (Daymond, 1985, 505). Only later, having read George Grant's essays, was he able to start writing again.

At one point, referring back to the original work revealed a minor inconsistency in one of the essays. For instance a reading of Munro's "Menesteung" reveals that Nepveu implies that the local newspaper sees

marriage in the offing for the two main characters since Jarvis Poulter walked Almeda Roth home from church:

Le journal local, la *Vidette*, friand de potinage et de faits divers, a beau suggérer la possibilité d'un mariage entre la jeune femme et son voisin établi de fraîche date, Jarvis Poulter, un chercheur de pétrole reconverti en marchand de sel, tout cela n'est que conjectures fondées sur le fait que l'homme l'accompagne parfois à l'église le dimanche (1998, 241-242).

In fact, Munro's text states the opposite, and the entire meaning of this passage rests on the importance of the preposition "to." The French translation implies that the couple is going to church together and that this is in fact a "declaration."

In truth, Jarvis Poulter only walks her home:

"Nor does he call for her, and walk with her *to* church on Sunday mornings. That would be a declaration. He walks her home, past his gate as far as hers; he lifts his hat then and leaves her (59).

Other frustrations were encountered when trying to track references from disparate readings, the sources of which were provided in only the most general terms. For example, Nepveu's translation of William Carlos Williams' lines "vers la fin de sa vie: 'Un nouveau monde/ n'est qu'un nouvel esprit. Et l'esprit et le poème/ ne font qu'un.'" (1998, 62) required thumbing through seventy-six pages of *Pictures from Brueghel, and Other Poems* to find "A new world is only a new mind/ And the mind and the poem are all apiece" (1967, 76).

Conclusion

Nepveu's essays make sense in their timeliness within the Canadian context. Today, translation operates in a multiplicity of contexts, hinging not only on the relationship that Canada and Québec have entertained with their

European heritages, but also on their relationship with the United States, Central and South America. Authoritative voices such as Nepveu's level the literary playing field.

Living as a recluse, Emily Dickinson "came to full 'consciousness' at the very moment when American literature came to flower" (1924, 11). Judith Farr says of Dickinson that "her works of narrative and stylistic elements from the works of others does not reflect "massive rummaging" but a cultivated and scholarly imagination" (78). Williams notes *In the American Grain* that Dickinson was able to "to live against the stream" (1925, 180). In her poetry we can see "...the closely focused vision" that Northrop Frye attributes to Canadian writers (138).

The voyage to the New World meant both a civilizing project and a reassessment of the writer's relationship to a physical space, and how this became a psychological space that resisted communion with the experience of settling in a land often perceived as either barbaric or mythical. Translating their experience into words became a way for the authors discussed in Nepveu's essays to understand and come to terms with this reality. Translating Nepveu's essays has meant a movement toward new ideas, concepts, and words. As E.D. Blodgett discovered upon reading Jacques Brault's work *Poèmes des 4 côtés*: "The governing metaphor of the book - an old theme in Québécois writing - is that of the voyage; to translate is to be transferred. But it is a movement that moves only so far as a threshold" (25).

Nepveu would counter: "Toute littérature, si liée soit-elle à une culture particulière, n'a pour moi de sens que si on en sort, pour y revenir, autrement, changé, un peu égaré, lesté d'images et d'idées nouvelles" (1998, 9). His introspective journey has been worthwhile translating, and though translating his work is mostly done "à ras le texte" (Berman, 1995, 48), the readings involved in the process often provided a welcomed change. Jane Everett sees in the study of literary essays "un terrain de recherche très prometteur" (110). Nepveu's writings produce a lasting effect on the reader, and his ideas remind the reader, as Antoine Lavoisier, an eighteenth century French chemist, discovered through his experiments, that "rien ne se perd, rien ne crée, tout se transforme."

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