

Comptes rendus/Book reviews

Betty Bednarski. *Autour de Ferron; littérature, traduction, altérité.* Toronto: Editions du Gref, 1989.

Both the introduction to *Autour de Ferron* and the preface by Jean-Marcel Paquette take pains to assert that this book began as a thesis. No apology is needed, but such comments may help to explain why the book has three parts which, without explanation, might look as if they don't go well together.

The first section, entitled "Trois lectures de la littérature québécoise," recalls most clearly the book's academic origins. It establishes the links between translation, reading, academic teaching and critical writing, arguing that translation and translation theory can reinstate the balance between author and reader that recent critical theory has tended to upset. All of this is perfectly solid, but nothing new to anyone familiar with what has come to be known as *traductologie*.

The final section is written in English and is comprised of a short essay entitled "Rereading Jacques Ferron," first published in *The Antigoniish Review* in 1985, not long after Ferron's death. In marked contrast with the first section, it has none of the cool academic tone and is, instead, an intensely personal account of Bednarski's rediscovery of Jacques Ferron the reader and her first thoughts about autobiography (Ferron's and her own) in reading and writing:

We are all readers and writers. I am Ferron's reader and beyond that I am the reader of my own life, of which he is forever a part. But I am also, by natural extension, the virtual writer of that life (p.138).

This is obviously not the usual stuff(ing) of which academic theses are made. Not only does Bednarski express her personal affection for the author she is studying, she actually makes quite clear her identification with one of Ferron's characters: Ann Higgitt whom she calls, in the Afterword to her translation of *Les roses sauvages*, "...more than the representative of the English Maritimes...the central mind of the novel."

These first and last sections of *Autour de Ferron* are not so much thesis and anti-thesis as they are a framing device for the main part of the book, where the intimate link between personal

and academic is steadfastly maintained, giving a study which is moving to read, and also good literary criticism.

The title of this main section indicates clearly its direction: "Réflexions sur l'altérité à partir d'une lecture de quelques mots anglais dans un texte français." Bednarski begins by focusing on that peculiar use Ferron makes of words such as *néveurmagne*, *gagnestère*, *ouonnedeurfoules*, or that wonderful interrogative sentence in a work: *ouèredéare?* Basically (and Bednarski analyses their complexity in some detail), these are "French" transcriptions of English words as they might be pronounced by a québécois. To begin with, they represent a problem for the translator. How can one convey to a reader of an English translation the impact of these "English" words in a French text? For Bednarski the reader, they raise a problem of interpretation. Why are they there? What is their significance? She makes a distinction between Ferron's use of these words and apparently similar usages by writers of *joual*, arguing that there is a realist impulse behind literary *joual*, a depiction of linguistic impoverishment and faybles that is not present in the context of Ferron's highly non-realist fiction, where such words become a magical appropriation of English by French, and hence an empowerment. I suspect Bednarski may overstate her case, and that there is more appropriation in writing *joual* than she suggests, but that argument could take us far afield.

It is the next step of the discussion which I find most fascinating, as Bednarski moves from these specific words to the broader picture of the English presence in Ferron's work, especially in various manifestations of the poet Frank Scott as seen in *Le Ciel de Québec*, *La charette*, *La Nuit*, *Les Confitures de coings* and other works. As she points out, there is often a curious identification between the narrator and these Scott-figures, so much so that one might speak of alter-egos, as Ferron tries to work out through his characters the complexity of the relationship between French and English-speaking Quebec and the relationship of Quebec to the rest of Canada. Bednarski argues that this *altérité* is a crucial component of Ferron's work. In later years, particularly after the events of 1970, manifestations of Scott give way to what might be called a more self-contained *altérité* through which Ferron investigates the relationship between himself and the "other" as québécois (particularly in the essays of *Du Fond de mon arriere-cuisine*); or between himself as writer and the "other" who is Ferron the medical doctor (especially in "L'exécution de Maski"); or between himself as writer and the "other" as reader.

This study of *altérité* in Ferron, grounded but not mired in the theories of Mikhail Bakhtine, starting with individual words and moving to a comprehensive view of language, society and the creative process, finally results in a very convincing illumination of some notoriously difficult texts. Of course this is not the last word. As Ferron pointed out in "Dieu et ses scribes," the Bible

continues to be written. But for the moment this is one of the most coherent, well-argued analyses of this author that I have seen. And in the end, Bednarski brings it all around again to the question of translation by engaging in a quiet polemic with those who would argue that translation is appropriation and aggression. Seeing herself as an integral part of Jacques Ferron's *altérité*, she talks of translation as a *belle complicité* and hers is perhaps the best personal account of that complicity since Frank Scott and Anne Hébert's correspondence over "The Tomb of the Kings."

Anyone wondering what I find so refreshing about this book should have a close look at the passage from pp.121-123, where Bednarski writes about an awkward and finally momentous correspondence she had with Ferron concerning two words in one story. It is a passage very revealing about both author and translator. The concluding sentence reads: "Cette 'collaboration', qui n'en était pas une, servait ainsi à orienter mon regard de lecteur, à le détourner du mot vers l'homme, à le déplacer là où de toute urgence il était requis" (p.123). It is a beautifully written passage and one which shows most clearly the synthesis of affect and critical acumen which I find remarkable.

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