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Examples for Cultural and Linguistic Spaces in English-language Writing in Québec

Abstract

My intention is to analyse two novels: Keith Henderson's THE RESTORATION: the referendum years (1987) and Keith Harrison's Dead Ends (1981) from the point of view of cultural colonization. Both novels are embedded in the period after the Quiet Revolution ambience in Québec which is manifested in their spatial and temporal adequacy of that time. The paper will focus on the possibilities of cross-cultural writing and the intertextual mode of representation. The analysis of the works will follow the socio-historical period they concentrate on: they share the conscious support of the gradually developed readiness towards acculturation in the new society in Québec.

Résumé

Je me propose d'analyser deux romans: THE RESTORATION: the referendum years (1987) par Keith Henderson et Dead Ends (1981) par Keith Harrison du point de vue de la colonisation culturelle. Les deux romans s'inscrivent dans l'ambiance de la période d'après la Révolution Tranquille au Québec, leur cadre spatio-temporel étant parfaitement adéquat à ladite période. L'étude a pour but de montrer les possibilités d'une écriture interculturelle et d'un mode intertextuel de représentation, tout en impliquant les aspects socio-historiques de la période en question. En effet, ces deux romans partagent une ouverture d'esprit consciente à l'égard d'un processus d'acculturation dans la nouvelle société du Québec.

My aim is to show the situation of the Anglophones after the Quiet Revolution in Québec on the basis of two novels:

Keith Henderson's *THE RESTORATION: the referendum years* and Keith Harrison's *Dead Ends* (1981). I regard the texts as both cultural and literary discourses. Because of the different textual strategies applied by the two authors respectively, I shall deal with them as case-studies in specific intercultural dialogues. My argument on the basis of these two novels (apart from many others) is that the "Anglos" have become much more open to the new reality in Québec society. Unequalled changes have affected the society of Québec since 1970. The significance of the changes are summed up Sherry Simon:

It is surely something of a truism to say that Québec has entered a crisis of culture as it passes from an ideal of homogeneous, collective identity to a more

problematic and heterogenous conception of social and symbolic union. Increasing diversity in the representations of cultural space reflects the plurality of discourses and interests which seek expression within the borders of Québec culture. (1991, 167)

In accordance with the social changes we have entered a period when the English-language writer's importance is different from what it used to be. As Linda Leith observes,

Caught up as no other English-Canadian writers have been caught up in the maelstrom of change, and living as no other English-Canadian writers live in a society with a French face, these writers have produced a body of work distinct in some ways from other contemporary English-Canadian fiction. (1989/90, 95)

In the light of the above, it is intriguing to meet the protagonist, Gilbert Rollins, in Keith Henderson's *THE RESTORATION: the referendum years* (1987). He is the victim of cultural colonization. Gilbert is a student of architecture, interested in one of those few buildings in Montréal that date back to the period of the French régime. He would like to find out more about the remaining parts of a convent, *Couvent des Récollets*, since he is working on his PhD dissertation on the architectural history of Montréal. Believing that certain documents will help his research, he is manipulated into stealing them by his Québécois separatist "friends", and this act leads only to endanger the permanency of his father's job. Later, as these documents attest, the spot on which his father's job is located is to be declared to belong to the "national monument[s] of the people of Québec" (155). The "people of Québec" undoubtedly refers only to French Québécois. To his surprise Gilbert finds himself in the middle of territorial disputes. The author uses historical reality to depict the relationship between dominant and dominated cultures.

According to Leith, Henderson incorporates "a mix of political allegory and conventional realism" in his novel. (1989/90, 103) Henderson fulfils his aim successfully. The novel is clearly a novel of ideas, and as it unfolds, the ideologies represented by the Anglophone businessmen, the separatist Québécois, and those trying to interact between the ideologies are speculatively opposed.

Time and space are identified: it is the first part of the year of 1980, the year of the referendum that decided for Québec to stay within the Canadian confederation; it is Montréal the centre of political confrontations.

The importance of Gilbert's character lies in his "betweenness". Structurally the novel is built on dualities with Gilbert trying to act as a peacemaker between the opposite sides. The convent to be restored is a mixture of French and English heritages since it has a wing that was added by the English; it is the symbol of a possible "cultural blending" (113). The old convent is placed symbolically underneath a new building that of the Mercier and Granville Printing and Wholesale Stationers, a manifestation of English enterprise. (Another ecclesiastical building, the Church of St Jacques, is considered to represent the transitional period in Québec, since by now it has become part of the university,

and it is “the pride of Québec” (124).) Montréal is depicted through the eyes of a student of architecture – though it is not a first person narration – thus, the city is mapped out for the reader, and one can follow how the cityscape has changed. The ever-increasing ethnic diversity of the city is commented on in relation to the parts of Montréal that have been inhabited by “strange-tongued immigrants” (143) with their opinions on architectural style. The ethnocentricity and class consciousness of them cannot be questioned when Pam, Gilbert’s sister, wonders about whom her child would play with in a neighborhood of Italian and Chinese people.

The documentary quality of the novel is manifested both in its spatial and temporal adequacy. The cultural ambiance of the new Québec is present in the depiction of the new generation of Québécois, who no longer have a *Confédération des syndicats catholiques* but a *Confédération des syndicats nationaux*, which indicates on the one hand, the decline in the importance of religion and, on the other hand, the strengthening of nationalist feelings. They are interested in everything new and associate traditionalism with WASPs, a feature historically attributed to French-Canadians. Thus Gilbert’s interest in the old may seem paradoxical. He convinced himself with the help of his historical self-consciousness that his interest in the convent could be acceptable; it has played a role in the history of English Québécois, too. Ironically enough, he may seem to be more traditional than his French counterparts belonging to the same generation. His endeavours are for his community, too; his search for identity is not individualized; it serves his community as well.

To illustrate the importance of the counterparts of reality the novel focuses on, I would like to add a few more examples: Gilbert is caught between the interests of his father and those of his separatist acquaintances – he likes both parties but does not sympathize with either – he reads intentionally both *The Gazette* and *Le Devoir*; his mother tried to convince her husband to leave Québec, but is surprised when her daughter decides to do so; in regard to the burning down of Gilbert’s father’s firm accusations come equally from both the extreme separatist and the federalist sides.

Gilbert’s apparent hesitancy originates in his living in two cultural worlds, yet for most of the novel he is an utterly lonesome figure not understood by either side: he suffers from spatial and temporal dislocation. He tries to believe in the cultural discontinuity of the French and the English being divided; he is not without a historical memory. He criticizes equally the narrow-minded French and English people. He is aware of the internal divisions and disaffiliations in each group. His struggle is a cultural struggle; he is fighting for the cultural recognition of both groups (symbolized by the convent); he is moving around in a politicized cultural space. Gilbert, politically motivated, is a protagonist, who promotes dialogue between cultures.

To bring the two communities together, French is also used in the novel; language variance increases the social context of the text. The importance of bilingual authors is summed up by Karrer and Lutz in the following way:

[...] the specific primary bilingualism of many minority authors allows for a specific double frame of perception that crosses and questions cultural, political and social boundaries to explore new territories in between. (1990, 27)

Gilbert belongs to the bilingual generation unlike his mother, who is very much concerned about how she would be living in Québec should it separate from the rest of Canada. Most of the Anglophone and Francophone characters are bilingual. French is frequently used when phrases originating in a certain historical period are uttered. The infight between languages is often reproduced when characters are carried away emotionally, or speak under stress:

“What the hell’s got into you?”

“*Mange d’la merde, Gilbert.* You don’t think I know who gave the cops those names? Who else? Your daddy give [sic] you a big payoff, eh? *Tu m’écœures, Gilbert. Vraiment, tu m’écœures.*” (191)

Henderson’s choice of vocabulary often ridicules the never-ending language debate:

[...] Kelly Street, with the wet sand left over from the winter, the warm surprising smell in the air, and the gangs of children walking home from school. Now it was called *Henri Bourassa Boulevard – Henry Btrdsass Boulevard* as his cousins had christened it in visceral protest over the change to French the year before they left for Winnipeg. (93) (emphasis added)

In a systematic way, the author manages to endow each of his characters with an idiolect different from that of the others; it would be fairly easy to identify different characters by different speech patterns. His novel meets the specifications defined by Bakhtin:

The novel can be defined as a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized. (1988, 262)

The ending of the novel is ambiguous, though its openness is not a weakness but on the contrary, one of its strengths. We are left without knowing who set the firm on fire; the English are as suspect as the French. Majority and minority cannot be disassociated, and both can be held responsible, with different motivations though, for the same deeds. The one-sided perspective of the restoration favours Francophones as opposed to shared interest. Nevertheless, unlike the rest of his family, Gilbert decides to stay in Québec. His group belonging is unambiguous; his allegiances to different groups are supported by his strong belief: “This place – the city, the country could be a model” (69).

Keith Harrison’s *Dead Ends* (1981) is an experimental piece of fiction, and the way he approaches the problem of ethnic conflicts is multilayered; to some extent the form reflects the complexity of the different kinds of peculiar frictions that have existed in Canadian society. Hutcheon classifies it as a novel (1988, 87); while compiling *Dead Ends*, however, the protagonist asks herself if she is

writing a piece of short story, a novel, or a “long short story, a *provest*” (41) where internal monologues are disrupted by dialogues. The novel is about “the artistic process” (Hutcheon, 87), and is also grounded in political actuality: the time of Pierre Trudeau with René Lévesque’s separatist provincial government in power in Québec. The time is still a transitory period in the province’s history when it could not forget the past yet but is only half-ready for modernization.

The experimentation is presented through the voice/s of a distressed woman. The novel is a piece of postmodern literature in accordance with Hutcheon’s definition of the term:

From what I can glean from the *usage* of the term, “postmodernism” would seem to designate art forms that are fundamentally self-reflexive – in other words, art that is self-consciously art (or artifice), literature that is openly aware of the fact that it is written and read as part of a particular culture, having as much to do with the literary past as with the social present. (1988, 2)

The articulation of experiences is based on dualities; the acceptance of the impossibility of fusing contraries is part of postmodern discourse (Hutcheon, 4). The following are the structural and thematic juxtapositions in the novel: the male voice from Vancouver is linked to the female voice from Montréal; the relationship between the French and the English in Québec is focussed on; the white are contrasted with “visible” minorities; native people are differentiated from new settlers; goyim are presented in contrast with Jews; North Americans are made distinct from Asians; sailing and skiing, summer and winter, flying and drowning, the figures of doctor and patient, man and woman are compared. (Jessica in Montréal and Richard in Vancouver face similar difficulties in life. Both are involved in writing, both have a “messy life” (89), are divorced and try to raise a child.) Life is set against death, writing and reading are considered as separate and combined processes. The narrator says: “I’m tired of seeing double” (77).

Dead Ends belongs to what Hutcheon defines as *historiographic metafiction*: “fiction that is intensely, self-reflexively art, but is also grounded in historical, social and political realities” (1988, 13). Harrison creates a female author, a Montréalaise, who writes about her creation of an American man visiting Vancouver, and checking out on logging operations as an “industrial spy” (118). He possesses two identifications, two names – another example of dualities.

Dead Ends is not only cross-cultural writing but also cross-regional writing: life in Montréal is compared to life in Vancouver from the point of view of ethnic cleavage. Socio-cultural identity is defined differently in the two parts of Canada. It is primarily based on “bestial” (63) racism in Vancouver if we accept Francis’s definition of the term:

By “racism” we understand a social doctrine that assumes a constant relationship of social with mental and cultural characteristics and which provides a legitimization of the

discrimination against people exhibiting particular somatic characteristics by postulating their innate inferiority. (1976, 382)

The conflicts caused by interethnic mixing reflect different minority-majority concerns. The confrontations are mainly between white people and “visible” minorities in Vancouver; in Montréal they are lower-keyed and are primarily between the English and the French. But ethnic identity crisis is one of the central preoccupations both in Vancouver and in Montréal:

Yuki takes better care of plants than I do: misting, shaking them out, re-potting. But she’s even more confused about being Japanese than I am being about Jewish. (89)

The author’s support of bilingualism is not overt but implicit; she manages to create interlingual and, structurally-speaking, interchapter puns too (38, 96). The protagonist is divorced from a Francophone man, but she would imagine a better life for her English-speaking friend in Québec than in Israel or in Edmonton, if only she could speak French, let alone *joual*. Her friend admits: “If I could speak *joual*, even French, I’d be much happier here [Québec]” (45).

The metafictional self-consciousness persists in the novel with multidimensional relations that involve the locale, ethnicity, genre and authorship: “Postmodern texts tend to make self-conscious their writing, their reading, and the various contexts in which both acts take place” (Hutcheon, 17).

From the point of view of style, the parts related by the male voice are more staccato, while the female voice is more even, more regular, though with hesitations, which creates a delicate balance between the two distinct parts with constant tension within each at the same time.

Dead Ends finally ends with the drowning of the American entrepreneur on Canadian soil, which follows the imagery of the novel. The narrator’s last deed is killing her American protagonist. She, however, stirs the sympathy of a Québécoise woman. Her activity is creativity that is closely linked to death. She opts for life, though, despite her dubious feelings concerning the Québécoise woman and her own self:

“Es ch’pe vs aider?”

“Non.” I don’t really need help. “C’est O.K., merci.”

“Why?” The gentle old woman in three-quarters profile with her Québécois voicing of “ou” speaks my double feelings.

“Why, mercy, why.” (135)

The intertextual mode of representation becomes unmistakable towards the end of the novel through constant references to other writers, in particular to Tolstoy. The last scene ends with the narrator pondering on death in a metro station in Montréal evokes the tragic railways in *Anna Karenina*. The resolution is formulated by a hidden allusion to Hugh Hood’s short story “Flying a Red Kite” (1962), which symbolizes the potential achievement of harmony. In this regard *Dead Ends* relinquishes postmodernism; the ray of hope surfacing in the end suggests the possibility of transcending chaos created by human relationships.

The characters in both novels move around in an idiosyncratic way, but what they share is the fact that they have to face the intricacies of cultural and linguistic spaces in a polyphonic milieu hand in hand with their own human frailty. Both writers are cultural intermediaries; their conception of the self is cultural mediation. Being members of a minority within a minority Harrison and Henderson encourage intercultural dialogue in their novels.

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