

JUDIT MOLNÁR

SEARCH FOR IDENTITY IN THE ENGLISH-LANGUAGE
WRITING OF ALLOPHONE QUEBECERS

Ethnic writing has by now become into the focus of scholarly interest in Canada yet the literature produced in English by Allophones, i.e. authors of neither British nor French origin in Québec has still remained largely unknown. The society of Québec has changed tremendously during the past three decades which resulted in producing a culturally diversified population. In like manner, the literature of Québec has gained new dimensions, too. I have singled out two intercultural writers, who are Québécois by choice in order to compare the literary expression of their being marginalized in the culturally plural society of Québec. Their ethnic backgrounds are different; Raymond Filip comes from Germany of Lithuanian parentage, Mary Melfi is of Italian origin. What connects these writers is the fact that they write in one of the official languages of Canada, however, not in the official language of Québec and that they both belong to ethnic minorities, which installs cultural distinctiveness into their works. My specific interest lies in contrasting the literary representation of their individualized responses to the ethnocultural composition of the society surrounding them. Raymond Filip's *After the Fireworks* (1989) and Mary Melfi's *Infertility Rites* (1991) have elements in common but distinctive features as well.

Language has always been a most sensitive issue in Québec, in accordance with which both writers put a great emphasis on language variance. The problem is even more delicate in their individual cases because they have both chosen to operate in the language that has threatened the distinctiveness of the “belle province”. The polyphonic character of their settings is treated more directly by Raymond Filip since for him language is of paramount importance in a language-divided place. The narrator in ‘Allophone’ says: “In this politician-ridden province, language was no longer a treasure, or an issue, just a game, a friendly fight with neutral corners growing crowded” (7). But this is meant ironically for the cacophony of voices is in the the centre of his stories. Mary Melfi’s representation of language awareness is linked to social demands imposed upon members of society according to the different generations they happen to belong. Thus mother tongue maintenance and/or loss for the protagonist in *Infertility Rites* is connected to the intricate and inimical relationship between her and her mother. As has been noted by Fulvia Caccia: “Language of Eden, language of Return in the manner of Hebrew for the Jews, Italian has provoked contradictory feelings of hate, love and indifference” (1985: 159). Raymond Filip’s description of interethnic communication is comprehensive and very vivid indeed, while Mary Melfi’s treatment of the linguistic map is largely metalinguistic, though not inclusively, concentrating basically on Italian and English with occasional references to other voices, too. The linguistic behaviour of the French, the English, and “the others”, their social interactions are in the centre of the first two stories ‘Allophone’ and ‘Rat Racist’ by Raymond Filip. In the remaining stories his scope somewhat narrows down to the communicative procedures between the English and the Québécois. The visual representation of the complex discourse involving the mixture of different languages and even that of different registers has become an artistic strategy for Raymond Filip. His method is certainly supported by the following belief:

The use of untranslated words as interface signs seems a successful way to foreground cultural distinctions, so it would

appear even more profitable to attempt to generate an 'interculture' by the fusion of the linguistic structures of two [or more] languages. (Ashcroft et. al. 1989: 66)

The systematic use of italics, the presence and the absence of translation equivalences, the phonetic imitation of "immigrant" speech all add to the colourful portrait of Québec's polyglossia, which is even further enriched by the author's playful handling of language(s) not excluding successful and highly original puns even across languages. The following passage is an illustration of how he switches back and forth among linguistic codes:

"Comment?" Puzzled the pressure group of two. *"Y 'fou lui. Regardes pas .*

My French not so fluid! But *Jesus Maria!* If I be good in French, I teach you good!"

"Vincas!" Ona reprimanded him. *"Ka tu cia kvailioji?*

Neerzink ju! Ainum nuomo!" — Why are you fooling around? Don't bait them. Let's go home!

"I very sorree for you, sir," One of the community women dared to answer back. "Is not my fault."

"Commoonist make you see like dis!" Vincas poked out their eyes in jest. *"You comprenez?"*

"Nous ne sommes pas communistes."

"Commonist! Somevere-my-love-socialist! Same phony baloney!" (28)

The uninitiated reader may wonder about the readability of such passages, but I wholly agree with Dasenbrock, who says that "to make it [a text] unintelligible is not to make it unmeaningful: the use of opaque foreign words can be part of a deliberate artistic strategy" (1987: 15).

The writer's cross-cultural imagination originates in their regional consciousness in their own respective way. Raymond Filip's documentary realism illuminates the social reality of Québec in the near past, while Mary Melfi's fictional world is more personal, though with a strong sense of the

social milieu, which, however, does not focus strictly on Québec but on Canada and on North America in general for that matter. Thus the cultural groundings of the texts are not the same; the political climate of Québec is more in the centre of interest in Raymond Filip's stories, at the same time the political overtones cannot be missed in Mary Melfi's novel either. The diverse ethnocultural environment produces an acute political awareness in Raymond Filip's stories viewing Allophones thrown into the middle— and this way being bound together to some extent— of the never-ending battle of the two founding nations—, which is most acutely experienced in the province of Québec. Thus the conflict between the French and the English serves as the basis and/or the substructure for other interethnic group struggles involving national, racial, religious, and linguistic differences.

The changed political ambiance of Québec after the Quiet Revolution of the sixties is perceived unambiguously by Raymond Filip. The growing population of both English-speaking and French-speaking Allophones together with the recent minority status of those of British descent are dealt with in his stories. The former is elaborated on in the first half of the volume, and the latter in the second half. The stories abound in timely references. The allusions to politics are of two types: on the one hand, they are of either national or international importance, on the other hand they evoke either directly the immediacy of the events or are more obliquely scattered in "neutral" conversations with obvious connotations, though. An example for the first kind is present in 'Allophone' when being an exile in Québec is favourably compared to being an exile in one of the ex-labour camps of the ex-Sovietunion.

To longing for some hallowed place of peace to call home. To hold two handfuls of earth and say here. Not to feel six thousand miles an *exile*. Not to yearn for any other residence. But to honk your horn, have a neighbor wave hello, and be accepted as one of them. Perhaps good luck was on its way in this province shaped like a beaten heart. (18—19) (emphasis added)

In the following I will briefly illustrate the other types of hints Raymond Filip uses in establishing a strong political sense in his fiction. The traces left behind by the FLQ gain special importance since they appear side by side with the swastikas ('Chantal' 82). The significance of the concrete historical moment is obvious in 'The Best Ice of Québec':

Now it was *the spring of 1977. The first separatist government in the history of Québec had been elected that fall.* And there was talk of greater Depression on English and French tongues. (103—104) (emphasis added)

Raymond Filip's adroit handling of language(s) is noticeable when he slips in phrases with concrete political meanings for no apparent reason into everyday conversations and this way produces a special kind of new language blend. The description of the problems of a couple's splitting in 'Chantal' resembles the possible solutions that have long been discussed for resolving a similar situation between Canada and Québec: separation or sovereignty association.

After the couple split, Chantal was left on the lawn, literally. No quality home to call home, no quality friend to call friend, Alain suggested his parents' duplex for accomodation. But that wasn't *separation*, that wasn't *sovereignty association!* ('Chantal' 92) (emphasis added)

The often heard Québécois slogan from the sixties *maîtres chez nous* ("masters in our home") is also given a funny and ironic twist when it is used by a Québécoise woman enjoying an evening together with an Anglophone man in a dilapidated building for homeless people in Montréal ('Chantal' 94). PQ (Parti Québécois) stands for "Pack Quick" in 'The Best of Quebec' (111) alluding to the massive exodus of the Anglophones from Québec after the party came into power.

Tensions of different kinds in the society of Québec together with cultural alienation is present in the stories, however, attempts to ease cross-

cultural existence are made by the various protagonists. To achieve this goal the primary means is to try and master each other's language at least to some extent as it is illustrated in each story without exception. The number of characters consciously trying to learn French even at old age is striking. It also testifies that a new attitude has been taking shape towards integration, but not assimilation into the society of Québec. The difference between the two is well-defined by the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism:

... *integration* 'does not imply the loss of an individual's identity and original characteristics of his original language and culture'. *Assimilation*, on the other hand, is 'almost total absorption into another linguistic and cultural group.' (Saint-Jacques 1985: 595)

The reader is left with the feeling that the solution to the problems, the source of which can be identified in the internal politics of Québec, is to be found in intercultural mediation at different social levels.

Political consciousness is present in Mary Melfi's novel, too, written about unmistakably from the perspective of a protagonist, Nina, who belongs to the second generation of Italian—Canadian immigrants. Mary Melfi's immediate references to Québec are less direct and overwhelming than those of Raymond Filip's. Nina's standpoint is reflected in one of her paintings that foregrounds Italians with the two founding nations in the background at the historical moment when the fate of the British and the French was decided in North America.

In one of her life-size paintings, for example, male giants are playing *bocce* with dolls dressed in traditional Italian attire. In the background—the battle of the Plains of Abraham. (175)

Mary Melfi's protagonist can foresee a future for Canada when it would be swallowed up by the USA with Québec preserving its distinctiveness(84). Nina often thinks in terms of a North American context

attaching the same value systems to Canada and the USA. She finds even art produced in the two countries indistinguishable. She tells her husband:

You want to find reasons why the Group of Seven is Canadian rather than American. But you won't be able to find any. The Group of Seven could have been American. We could be American. In fact we are... with or without free trade. (38)

She considers both countries to be the living forms of shallowness, superficiality and dullness. She can find only just a few attributes to living in Canada: "Unlike the people south of the border I do not have to be wealthy in order to be healthy" (84). Being critical both of her Italian heritage and of what the new world offers, she lives in full awareness of different merits and charges. Yet the country she is preoccupied with is unique: "I do not care about the country's problems. It is not my country. My country is my body and a revolution against it has taken place" (17). It is certainly true since the novel chronicles the movement from several painful abortions to childbirth in the end. The agonizing series of attempts materialize within the bounds of an unhappy marriage between a *wasp* and a *wop*. The latter is a discriminating way of naming Italian immigrants who are presumed to reside in Canada "without official papers." Nina is obsessed with the idea of creation both in trying to become a mother and a successful artist. Daniel, her husband, with a totally different cultural background, that of a wasp, is puzzled by Nina's desires. He can only understand her ambitions of realizing herself as a painter but her basic needs shared by many women, not only by "Italian mothers", remain cryptic for him for quite a while. It is interesting to note what Antonio D'Alfonso says about Italian—Canadian artists: "Few writers have actually written about being Italians. It is no surprise that the first Italian artists of Quebec were painters; practicing the *voiceless art*" (1985: 226). Nina also practises the art of painting, however she also produces a piece of writing; her own confessions. The importance of art is touched upon by Raymond Filip, too. Teaching Canadian literature is considered to be "revolutionary" in 'Winter of Content'(66), and Chantal, in the story named after her, enjoys *Les Grands Ballets Canadien* playing at

Place des Arts in Montréal (91).

Despite the fact that Nina has a controversial rapport with her Italian heritage, which is only partially integrated into her own self, the fundamental reason for the turmoil lived in her marriage can be found in the spouses' diverse ethnic origin. Paul-André Linteau's claim certainly holds true for Nina as well: "But their choice of English as the language of instruction for their children by no means meant that Italian Montrealers became assimilated into the British community" (1992: 191). Nina fails to establish a harmonious relationship at any level including her own body and mind, her immediate Italian relatives, her husband, the artistic community, the workplace. The multiethnic environment depicted in the novel serves as a context of crucial importance for the proceedings of Nina's self-discovery and self-definition through creation, which is the most pervasive element in her development.

The mode of Mary Melfi's representation is surreal, while that of Raymond Filip is realistic with a lexicon that is often determined by metaphor and to a lesser extent irony. Her protagonist is also a surreal artist, whose work is not appreciated by Canadians because instead of "entertaining" (123), her canvases are mirrors of her inner landscape. Her paintings, many of which are described in great many details or are commented on by herself and other characters as well, share a sense of fragmentation. This is the world of darkness, sewer land, guilt, blood, fear, an infertility maze: "I am neither Canadian nor Italian, but a citizen of the underworld, trapped in its maze, where it is always badly lit" (48). Things relate to one another in an absurd, displeasing manner in the same fashion as they do in her constant nightmares. Disconnected parts of the human body and the colour of red, the colour of blood dominate the recurring images of the novel. The generative force in the narration is provided by the continuous threat of possible abortions the narrator struggles with. The fact that her mother does not miss a single occasion to remind her of her various failures, as if they were due to her personal weaknesses, only increases her deep sense of utter hopelessness. Susan Iannucci's observation about second generation Italians qualifies true for Nina as well:

They are fully aware of what their parents gave up for them, but at times their own sense of loss, of belonging to neither the Old World nor to the New, is so strong that they are not the least bit grateful for what was done on their behalf without their consent. (1992: 209)

Nina feels that her body is also constantly being violated. Brute violence is present in some of Raymond Filip's pieces as well, but there it is experienced both by men and women and among the oppressed groups of the society.

Past, present and future are interwoven in a refined way through pointing out the relevant differences of the immigrant experience according to generations. To exist consciously in the continuum of time is a particular challenge for immigrants as it is proved by Nina's confused state of mind when on returning to the past for survival strategies she remembers ironically enough the "Italian motto: Never look back" (72). The difficulty of handing down experiences by one generation to another is elaborated on in 'Allophone' by Raymond Filip, too. Tamara J. Palmer has a valid point in this regard:

... this Fiction of Ethnicity is not only a reflection of profound dislocation and ambivalence, but also a vehicle for bridging the gap between past, present and future—a gap that is at the centre of the unavoidable stress involved in immigration and eventual adaptation. (1990: 93)

While fictionalizing the complex nature of the immigrant experience both Raymond Filip and Mary Melfi reach beyond the limiting forces of marginality, however. Each work has a final optimistic ring to it suggesting the promotion of ethnic tolerance. After serious confrontations with God and the rules dictated by the Catholic church, Nina says "thank you" (181) and makes peace with her God:

Certain of it now (even though one philosopher argues certain=uncertain). Certain I will offer after this regenerating bundle of humanity to the God of both Christians and heathens in thanksgiving. (181)

By not giving up to want to create a new life, Nina's overall perspective of cross-cultural existence must be positive. Similarly, Raymond Filip's individual stories and the well organized composite of his fiction imply the feasibility of transcultural dialogues. The final resolution lies in each case in the central characters' becoming able to love and being grateful for being loved. Supporting the possibility of easing the tension in intra- and interethnic relationships, it is suggested that the acceptance and even more the appreciation of differences in human nature can only be realized through mutual understanding. In sum, having fully explored life offered across ethnic boundaries, each writer has opted for transcending these boundaries in exchange for a more cosmopolitan way of existence. Their fiction proves the truth of what Daniel Taylor says:

In the midst of this malaise, the literature of the oppressed offers a realistic, nonsectarian moral vision. At the centre of this moral vision is a stubborn belief in the categories of good and evil. This belief, far from naive, is simple faith to reality. It does not pretend that good and evil comes neatly packaged, but it knows, often from personal experience, the foolishness of pretending that the two are only arbitrary cultural constructs. (1987: 4—5)

The works of Filip and Melfi support Linda Hutcheon when she claims that: "Its [Canada's] history is one of defining itself against centres" (1988: 4). In their case sub-group differences have helped to develop an ethnic self-esteem in the midst of the society of Québec by trying to balance the discourse of displacement and the various cultures, thus their "minority status" has been endowed with a new quality. Breaking through the close-knit cultural communities, they also advocate an attempt to "fit in" through

recognizing diversity, the source of which can be found in different cultural, linguistic and even literary heritages.

WORKS CITED

- Ashcroft, Bill et al. *The Empire Writes Back*. New York: Routledge, 1989.
- Caccia, Fulvio. "The Italian Writer and Language." *Contrasts*. Ed. Joseph Pivato. Montréal: Guernica, 1985. 155—167.
- D'Alfonso, Antonio. "The Road Between: Essentialism. For an Italian Culture in Quebec and Canada." Ed. Joseph Pivato. *Contrasts*. Montreal: Guernica, 1985. 207—229.
- Dasenbrock, Reedway. "Intelligibility and Meaningfulness in Multicultural Literature in English." *PMLA* 102. 1. 1987. 10—19.
- Filip, Raymond. *After the Fireworks*. Montreal: Guernica, 1989.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *The Canadian Postmodern*. Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- Iannucci, Susan. "Contemporary Italo—Canadian Literature." Eds. Roberto Perin and Franc Sturino. *Arrangiarsi*. Montreal: Guernica, 1992. 209—226.
- Linteau, Paul-André. "The Italians of Quebec: Key Participants in Contemporary Linguistic and Political Debate." Eds. Roberto Perin and Franc Sturino. *Arrangiarsi*. Montreal: Guernica, 1992. 179—205.
- Melfi, Mary. *Infertility Rites*. Montreal: Guernica, 1991.
- Palmer, Tamara. "Mythologizing the Journey To and From Otherness: Some Features of the Ethnic Voice in Canadian Literature." From 'Melting Pot' to Multiculturalism. Ed. Valeria Gennaro Lerda. Genova: Bulzoni Editore, 1990. 91—113.
- Saint-Jacques, Bernard. "Ethnic Languages." *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. Edmonton: Hurtig, 1985.
- Taylor, Daniel. "Why Literature of the Oppressed?" *Literature of the Oppressed*. 1.1. 1987. 3—5.