

Lost in Translation: The English Versions of Gabrielle Roy's Early Novels

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Article abstract

In translating the early works of Gabrielle Roy, Harry Binsse sought to make his English words "sing the same song" as the French source texts according to three principles: no omissions, no additions, no disfiguring flatness. Yet Binsse's very fidelity to these strictures led to substantive errors in the translations, altering characterization and meaning in Roy's novels. In avoiding flatness, Binsse's excessive lyricism and antiquated diction eclipsed Roy's signature simplicity. Conversely, his concern with linguistic and factual precision tended to mar any intended ambiguity or generalizations in the original text. Most significantly, Binsse's description of aboriginal and Third World peoples represents a different ideological perspective than Roy's, which the reader could mistakenly attribute to Roy. However, Binsse does ultimately adhere to his overall goal "not to build barriers" in translation, having widely contributed to the English accessibility and success of Roy's novels.

Lost in Translation: The English Versions of Gabrielle Roy's Early Novels

DARLENE KELLY

LIKE THE MAGIC PORRIDGE POT in the fairy tale, the Marcel Proust industry continues to churn out a stream of readers' guides, serious studies, and quirky appreciations. Recently it served up an English version of *À la recherche du temps perdu* by no fewer than seven different translators. Predictably, reviewers focused their attention on which of them best captured Proust's voice. André Alexis's response in *The Globe and Mail* was typical. After noting the unevenness of the collection, the reviewer sent Proust loyalists back to Scott Moncrieff's landmark edition, which was later refined, first by Terence Kilmartin, and then by D. J. Enright (4 January 2003). Writing in the *Times Literary Supplement* on 25 October 2002, Robert Alter agreed that the group of seven were frequently out of tune with Proust (not to mention with each other), but he also found fault with the Scott Moncrieff version: "For Proust's elegantly architectonic prose, with its peculiar combination of lyric density and surgical precision, Scott Moncrieff substituted a kind of post-Victorian gingerbread, and he repeatedly was unable to resist the temptation to 'improve' Proust" (11). The reader of Proust in English, it seems, remains à la recherche of *À la recherche*.

The debate over which non-French Proust is most authentic stimulates a reassessment of other literary translations. For Canadians the job badly needs doing. In the early stages of what became in Canada a literary boom, simply getting works translated was an achievement. An interest in analyzing these texts has not been marked, but a re-examination of them is in order, beginning with the classics. First among these are the writings of French Canada's great Gabrielle Roy, herself a devotee of Marcel Proust whose masterpiece she carefully studied, pencil in hand

(see Ricard 368-69). Can we say that Roy is well represented in English today? Her later works, notably the sensitive translations by Joyce Marshall and Patricia Claxton, have been justly praised. Of the early novels which brought her international fame, however, some of them written over half a century ago, there has been no reappraisal. What follows is an attempt to fill that gap by examining critically four early texts translated by Harry Lorin Binsse.

After the hasty error-ridden production of *The Tin Flute* (1947) by Hannah Josephson, Binsse inherited the job of translating Roy's next four works: *Where Nests the Water Hen* (1951), *The Cashier* (1955), *Street of Riches* (1957), and *The Hidden Mountain* (1962). Critical evaluation of their merit never amounted to more than a few random and divided observations. In a letter to Roy on 21 October 1955, the novelist Hugh MacLennan praised the achievement in *The Cashier* of her "superb translator" (Roy Papers).¹ Mary Jane Edwards underlined the prosodic beauty of a typical line excerpted from Binsse's *Street of Riches*, saying that the story's "note of sadness [resounds] in the English translation, in the long o's of 'wholly,' 'stroke,' 'lonely,' and 'sorrow'" (n.pag.). She argued that *The Hidden Mountain*, however, is often marred by "the translator's poor choice of English equivalents of French phrases" (n.pag.). Hugo McPherson echoed this opinion in his review of the book: "Harry Binsse's all-too-literal translation further diminishes the power of her language" (75).

Despite these negative comments, Roy was generally pleased with Binsse's work, especially at the outset. He was indeed a conscientious translator. In an unpublished essay about Roy and the travails of working with her that found its way into her papers, Binsse made clear his intention to be faithful to his source texts. One can see why the essay was never published: it is essentially a rambling series of unconnected facts about the author's life and output that are interspersed with a few *obiter dicta* on translating, occasionally illustrated. Yet it still affords a glimpse of what theorist Antoine Berman calls the translator's project (*Donne* 76-79), in this case a statement of objectives whose realization the curious reader will be led to explore. Succinctly expressed, Binsse's aim was, as he put it, to make his words in English "sing the same song" as her French. Some of them do so, and do so remarkably well, but other passages which we shall examine transform Roy's simple melody into baroque fioritura.

Most English readers were oblivious to what got lost in the Binsse translations. Like Scott Moncrieff's "post-Victorian gingerbread" prose,

Binsse's ornate writing had a charm of its own that gained Roy a wide international audience. Initially at least, the author herself was captivated by his work. In a letter to her husband, Marcel, written on 1 July 1951, Roy said that, while some collaboration with Binsse would "perfect" his translation of *La petite poule d'eau*, the first set of proofs "telle quelle [était] satisfaisante et même soignée," that is, "were quite satisfactory and even meticulous as they were" (*Mon cher* 201).³ Four years later, she confided to her husband that Binsse's translation of *Alexandre Chenevert* was "très digne, très belle," that is, ("very fitting, very beautiful") (*Mon cher* 398). After the appearance of *The Hidden Mountain*, however, she confided to her sister Bernadette that her "tiraillements," or wrangles, with Binsse made it essential to change translators. She admitted all the same that his work was very fine, although more "lyrique," that is, more poetical, than the source text (*Lettres* 64).

This excess lyricism did not mar every passage. In his unpublished essay, for example, Binsse quoted a representative sample of his work, with the original beside it, which he claimed that Roy especially admired:

I trust I shall be forgiven for doing a very risky thing, for quoting here in both languages a paragraph which Gabrielle Roy herself says she finds especially happy in translation. At least I know it is not bad ...

L'ivresse de descendre entre des rives secrètes, d'un vert plus dense que la nuit! Le ravissement des lianes bleues qui s'enroulaient à ses membres, puis se défaisaient! La qualité du silence en ce pays éteint! L'ineffable absence de toute vie, hors ce murmure égal et continu de l'eau. Même les arbres ici ne s'agitaient ni ne croissaient, arrêtés en des hautes branches stylisées qui, depuis des siècles, laissaient pendre des fleurs. Dans les anses brunes l'eau stagnait en larges corolles de mousse. Oh, l'incomparable détachement du dormeur!

The intoxication of sinking between secret shores, more thickly green than the night! How ravishing the blue fronds which curled about his limbs and then slipped by! The quality of the silence in this muffled land! The unutterable absence of all life, except for the water's even and continuous murmur. Even the trees here did not tremble or grow, but were fixed fast in high, stylized branches, which for centuries on end had held their pendant flowers. In brown inlets, the water stood stagnant, bearing great petaled cups of moss. Oh! the matchless release of the man asleep! (10).

Reading Binsse today, one could multiply examples of the transpar-

ent English cited here that allegedly pleased the author. Throughout *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*, Lawrence Venuti argues that a Binsse-like illusion of the translator's seeming to vanish into the source text has always been the dominant practice in English. Moreover, in the post-World War II period when Binsse began working on Roy, translation theory was influenced by what Venuti contends was an enhanced need for clarity as a result of new scientific research, advanced communications technology, and a boom in mass-market paperbacks (5). Venuti connects this emphasis on clarity with the way in which the standard language of most Anglo-American contracts bound the translator to a close adherence to the foreign text, with no omissions or additions other than what was needed to produce good English (310). Such contractual imperatives were in fact echoed in Binsse's resolve "to get it all down in English as it is in French, adding nothing [and] subtracting nothing" (9). This intention, however, was complicated by his additional goal of "avoiding flatness like the plague" (9). An assessment of Binsse's work according to his own strictures — no omissions, no additions, no disfiguring "flatness" — shows that, while he was quite capable of first-rate work, he was also at times *traduttore, traditore*, that is, both the translator and the betrayer, not only of the source texts, but also of his own professed ideal of fidelity.

Despite Binsse's attempt to "get it all down" in the target language, a cursory look at his translations of Roy reveals many inaccuracies, ranging from minor imprecision to substantive changes. His handling of numbers, for example, is often unsatisfactory. The eight men or so designated in "une huitaine d'hommes" (*MS* 16) became a "handful" (*HM* 7).⁴ Seeking peaceful solitude in the woods, Alexandre Chenevert is tormented by an inquisitive neighbour who subjects him to a volley of questions ("Alexandre avait déjà eu à subir trente-six questions" *AC* 193), a quantity which is awkwardly rendered as "half a hundred questions" (*TC* 129). The original idiom is translated in both the Harraps and Collins French-English dictionaries as "umpteen," following the definition given in the authoritative *Robert*: "Trente six, nombre utilisé familièrement pour désigner un grand nombre indéterminé" ("Thirty-six, a figure used informally to designate a large indeterminate number"). *La petite poule d'eau* opens with a picture of things as they were some fifteen years earlier ("une quinzaine d'années" 12), but Binsse adds five years to the count: "some twenty years ago" (*WN* 10). In one final example, the hundred or so Mennonites ("une centaine de Mennonites" *RD* 241) whom Christine's father helped to settle in Sas-

katchewan double in number with Binsse's use of the adjective "tenscore" (*SR* 227).

This sloppiness is perplexing, given how fussy Binsse could be. In his essay on Roy, for example, he made his correction of minutiae into a drama of sorts, with himself as the hero pitted against a slightly mutinous author. Although it seemed to irk Roy, Binsse insisted on correcting such mistakes as, in *Where Nests the Water Hen*, the precise number of Tousignant children and the botanical error of certain flowers blooming out of season, and in *The Cashier* the impossible cohabitation in the same stream of brook trout and pike (2-3). The same factual obsession may explain other passages where the French and the English texts diverge. For instance, Alexandre Chenevert agonizes over such evils as famine in what seems to him an overpopulated world. He asks a colleague if he knows how many million people there are in India alone. When the fellow submits a guess of fifteen or twenty, Alexandre expostulates, "Quinze, vingt! Es-tu dans ton bon sens, Godias? Il y a trois cent cinquante millions de gens aux Indes" (*AC* 65). In the English text, Alexandre supplies an equally precise number ("There are three hundred million people in India": *TC* 41), but it is fifty-million Indians short of the "trois cent cinquante millions" found in the French.

A different category of error is found in Binsse's substitution in English of different artists about whom a priest friend of Pierre's speaks in *La Montagne secrète*. Consequently, the cleric's rhapsodic tribute to "Breughel ... Et Delacroix! Van Gogh à present!" (*MS* 136) becomes "Breughel ... And Delacroix! As for Gauguin!" (*HM* 113). Also, a painting by Ghirlandajo called "L'homme à la verrue" (154) ("Man with a Wart") is renamed "Old Man and Boy" in English (128), a title closer to the official one, "Vieillard et un jeune garçon." Because Binsse's essay was written prior to the appearance of *La Montagne secrète*, it provides no clue as to why he changed these names and titles. One explanation may be derived from his musings in another context on the title *The Little Water Hen*: it was displeasing, he speculates, "first because it seemed to me to suggest a child's book, and second because it had about it a Chinese flavour, the reality of which I could not rationally justify, but which I felt was definitely there" (4). Here, then, Binsse allowed a translational decision to be dictated by an irrational hunch, basing his rejection of *The Little Water Hen* as a title on the need to avoid a juvenile air and a Chinese "flavour." Perhaps a like subliminal instinct led him to replace Roy's

choice of painters and titles with examples of his own. It is worth noting that, when given the opportunity after Binsse's death to amend his translation of *The Hidden Mountain*, Roy retained these corrections. Yet, when a few years later she revised *La Montagne secrète*, she declined to implement any of them. Either she forgot to do so, or perhaps Binsse's alteration of what she had written originally now struck her as impertinent.

For all Binsse's painstaking efforts in translating Roy, he could not easily have avoided (if he could have done so at all) what theorists such as Sherry Simon consider to be the cultural inscriptions of his day. By virtue of his investment, probably unconscious, in certain ideological views of the "Other" represented in the source text, Binsse willy nilly became, as Simon puts it, an "active agent" of their transmission (*Culture* 9), a process made inevitable by the fact that "toute traduction construit et réactualise des rapports de différence culturelle" (*Trafic* 55) ("every translation constructs and reactivates cultural differences"). His way of describing aboriginal and Third World people is a case in point. Wherever Roy uses the noun or adjective "Métis," for instance, Binsse substitutes the term "half-breed." Before translating Roy's posthumous memoir *La détresse et l'enchantement*, Patricia Claxton felt that it would be useful to reread Binsse's *Where Nests the Water Hen* in order that, in describing parts of Manitoba common to both books, she would not confuse readers by inventing a whole new vocabulary. Only in one case did she depart from Binsse's lexicon: "Je ne me suis éloignée de la terminologie de Binsse que dans un seul cas, celui où Binsse met *half-breed* pour 'Métis' ... À son époque, ce mot était peut-être acceptable, mais il ne l'est plus de nos jours" (*Colloque* 705) ("I only departed from Binsse's choice of words in one single instance, Binsse's use of *half-breed* for 'Métis' ... In his day and age such a word was perhaps acceptable, but that is no longer the case"). While Roy seemed ahead of her time in choosing "Métis" instead of "half-breed," her occasional use of the word "sauvage" gives the reader pause, although it may have been her intention to capture the diction of the unenlightened.⁵ Oddly enough, Binsse changes "sauvage" or "sauvagesse" to the more respectful title "Indian," yet this variation cannot be explained by any principled aversion to the word "sauvage," since he uses that term elsewhere. For example, Alexandre Chenevert's fretting over "des peuples lointains" (*AC* 65), that is, people in such far-off lands as India, in Binsse's version becomes fretting over "faraway savages" (*TC* 42). This inconsistency further complicates the English reader's interpretation of

Roy's work. In a politically sensitive age such as our own, as Patricia Claxton rightly noted, such diction is indeed unacceptable. It is also distracting, for the reader does not know whether to attribute it to the author or to the translator.

Those who want to know exactly what Roy said or did not say should also note Binsse's more substantive errors. Some are minor details whose loss does not threaten one's grasp of the book as a whole. Sherbets ("sorbets" *AC* 58), for example, become ice cream (*TC* 36); a "salière" (*AC* 60) ("salt shaker") is transformed into a "sugar shaker" (*TC* 38); a shabby carpetbag ("une pauvre valise en fibre" *AC* 181) is bafflingly rendered "a shoddy papier [*sic*]-mâché bag" (*TC* 120); and raspberry bushes ("les framboisiers" *AC* 189) shrink to "raspberries" (*TC* 127). Upon hearing a knock at the door, the mother in *Rue Deschambault* asks, "Seigneur, qui ça peut-il être?" (78). Instead of the exact query "Lord, who can that be?" Binsse changes the question to "'Lord, what can that be?" (*SR* 69). An island half a mile long in *La petite poule d'eau* ("longue d'un demi-mille" 13) becomes half a mile wide (*WN* 11). In *Rue Deschambault* Christine's handicapped sister Alicia briefly experiences "de vraies pensées ... comme des passantes voilées" (157), that is, "genuine thoughts ... like veiled women passing by," a metaphor entirely lost in Binsse's curious rendering of "passantes" as "passengers" (*SR* 145) rather than as "passersby." The above list of such errors is not exhaustive.

Other changes are of a major order. In a hymn of praise to art in *La Montagne secrète*, for example, Roy has one character make the following distinction: "Enfin il comprenait ce qu'entendait le maître quand il disait que n'est pas nécessairement oeuvre d'art l'oeuvre de Dieu" (221) ("Finally he understood what the master meant when he said that a work of God is not necessarily a work of art"). By omitting the crucial adverb "necessarily" ("nécessairement"), Binsse produces a theologically riskier proposition: "a work of God is not a work of art" (*HM* 185). Another unfortunate change was applied to Alexandre Chenevert's belief that other men had adjusted to wearing a prosthetic, the two cases in point being Harry Hopkins, who lived with a silver-clad stomach, and President Roosevelt, who had worn braces on his legs "toute sa vie" (*AC* 333) (all of his life). Almost immediately Alexandre doubts himself: "Du moins, Alexandre croyait avoir lu la chose ..." ("That is, Alexandre thought that he had read something along those lines ..."). The ellipsis marks, which are put where a period should have been, draw attention to Alexandre's

uncertainty about these facts. Here as elsewhere, he opines more boldly than his knowledge permits, but this recklessness is not evident in English, where Binsse shortens the time that Roosevelt wore braces (“toute sa vie”) to “the greater part of his life” (*TC* 223). Throughout the book Alexandre is bombarded by print on everything from newspapers to signboards. He makes himself wretched trying to synthesize this welter of information. Naturally, poor Alexandre often gets his facts wrong. Binsse’s precise qualification of the length of time that President Roosevelt wore braces, made perhaps to correct what he saw as yet another lacuna in Roy’s knowledge, is at odds with Alexandre’s fondness for sweeping generalizations, thereby altering Roy’s portrayal of him.

Other misreadings similarly alter the characterization found in the source text. In *The Cashier*, for instance, Binsse applies a key phrase to the wrong person. Visiting her emaciated father in the hospital, Alexandre Chenevert’s daughter Irène begins a long vigil: “Auprès de son père, le visage vieilli et pincé, Irène commençait cette longue et vraie connaissance des autres qui ne nous vient qu’à travers la peine” (*AC* 366). It is in fact the face of the cancer-ridden Alexandre, greatly aged by illness, that is looking ravaged, but Binsse misrelates the phrase to Irène herself, sitting near her father, “her face pinched and aged” (*TC* 245). Christine’s statement in *Rue Deschambault* that, while she was at one time able to cry at will, her tears were now spontaneous (“je n’ai plus eu besoin, pour pleurer, de vouloir pleurer” 66) is similarly misunderstood: “in order to cry I no longer needed to see others weep” (*SR* 59). The English should have read, “in order to cry I no longer needed to feel like crying.” In *La Montagne secrète*, Father LeBonniec warns Pierre that “les plus grands parmi nous travaillent pour des inconnus qui, bien souvent, du rest ne les comprendront qu’imparfaitement” (*MS* 134) (“the greatest among us work for total strangers who often, moreover, understand them only imperfectly”). Binsse’s statement that these spectators “will understand no part of it” (*HM* 111) allows them no acumen at all; moreover, it misses the rich ambiguity of the pronoun “les” which, in the original, embraces both the works and the creative minds from which they issue.

Another of Binsse’s imperfectly realized goals was “adding nothing” to the source text. As Roy had observed, her translator had a weakness for lyrical embellishments. This tendency was not surprising in one who had vowed to “[avoid] flatness like the plague” (9). The result was a far more ornate English than Roy’s understated French. For example,

in *La Montagne secrète* “un homme inconnu” (12) passes through the woods. Binsse designated this setting a “woodland” that was “traversed,” not, as one might expect, by an unknown man, but rather by “a man utterly beyond [a bystander’s] appraisal” (*HM* 3). Similarly, instead of the simple equivalent of “He yodelled joyfully” for “sa voix s’éleva en un gai yodel” (*MS* 26), we read “his voice rose strong in a wordless melody of joyful sound” (*HM* 16). Elsewhere in the same book, the noises made by the crackling fire and the wind were simply “paisibles” (201) (“peaceful”). Binsse waxes poetic, calling these sounds “Harbingers of peace” (168), a needless convolution. In *The Cashier*, the inadequate Alexandre Chenevert, when having his height measured by his doctor, is shown “se haussant sur la pointe des pieds” (150), that is, raising himself on tip-toe. Binsse decides that Alexandre is “adding a little to his stature by standing on tiptoe” (*TC* 99), thereby attributing a motive to the character that Roy had left undisclosed.

Like Scott Moncrieff with Proust, Binsse seemed unable to resist the temptation to “improve” on the original. As Antoine Berman has noted, such an “ennoblissement” treats the source text as raw material for what becomes “une ré-écriture” (*L’Auberge* 57). In *Rue Deschambault*, for instance, a street that was “sans trottoir encore” (8) (“still without a sidewalk”) in *Street of Riches* remains “still unencumbered by any sidewalk” (3), a ponderously connotative reading. The Tousignant home in *La petite poule d’eau* is exposed to a pitilessly bare sky, that is, “en plein ciel dépouillé” (14), but Binsse’s portrayal of the same house as “bare to the four winds of heaven” (*WN* 12) introduces a romantic touch that ill suits the family’s Spartan situation. Likewise, in *The Cashier* a beauty-care business, or an “établissement pour les soins de beauté” (*AC* 257), becomes the far more glamorous “place where beauty awaited the human face” (171), the magic of cosmetic transformation being underlined by the shift (in the assonance of “place,” “awaited,” and “face”) from mundane prose to poetry. Finally, where in *Rue Deschambault* a sad Aunt Theresina writes regretfully in a letter of the “éparpille-ment” (173), or “scattering” hither and yon, of her adult children, in English she exclaims, ““ what a diaspora!”” (*SR* 159), a witty allusion to the worldwide dispersion of the Jews that would have been quite beyond her.

To avoid “flatness” Binsse elsewhere uses literary expressions that are often cumbersome, not to say archaic. There is more than a hint of Shakespearean overreaching, for example, in his translation of “ces petits yeux”

(*MS* 43) (“these small eyes”) as “two tiny orbs” (*HM* 31). In *Alexandre Chenevert*, a stream “lavait sans fin une herbe frisée” (213) (“constantly washed up against a curly piece of greenery”), but in English, this stream “ceaselessly laved” (*TC* 129) it. “Lave” is indeed an English word, one Shakespeare memorably employed in the line “Basins and ewers to lave her dainty hands” in *The Taming of the Shrew* (II.i.341), but it is now obsolete. And the ghost of Hamlet hovers behind Binsse’s “perchance — to draw apart” (207) in *Street of Riches*. Antiquated diction like “bethought,” “espy,” and “descried” abounds in all four books; Binsse also favours elaborate locutions such as “these days of Our Lord” instead of “this day and age.” One might wonder why Roy, who wrote so simply, did not object to such distortions. Probably, because she learned English by reading its famous writers, her feel for the language was somewhat bookish. Moreover, she was famous in high school for her declamatory style in reciting Shakespeare, a skill that so impressed her teachers that she was called upon to do the dagger scene from *Macbeth* whenever English inspectors came to call (*Enchantment* 55). It is therefore not surprising that a person whose idea of good English was Shakespeare at his most quotable would welcome these echoes from his work.

Binsse’s elaborate phrasing also comes into play for what appear to be reasons of greater clarity. Once again it is useful to invoke the terminology employed by Antoine Berman to describe what he calls a “déformation” of the source text by, in this case, “l’allongement,” that is, a lengthening of the passage in the source text. He argues that increasing the number of words in the translation does not necessarily add to the meaning, or, in his crisp terms, “l’ajout n’ajoute rien” (*L’Auberge* 56). In *La Montagne secrète*, for example, a series of questions which one character had asked another are summarized in an elliptical manner: “D’où il venait? Ce qu’il avait vu? S’il était libre pour courir ainsi à sa guise?” (106). The second and third queries are recast as complete sentences: “Where did he come from? What had he seen lately? Was he free to wander around wherever he chose?” (*HM* 86-87). Then Binsse adds ellipsis marks, followed by the pointless clarification: “Such was the tenor of what he asked” (87). Elsewhere in the same novel he fleshed out — gratuitously — the picture of a dog salivating at the sight of a person devouring a last bite of food. Roy’s depiction is, as usual, condensed: “Quand le morceau de nourriture allait disparaître, chaque chien avançait un peu les babines, il salivait” (*MS* 50) (“Just as a piece of food was about to vanish, each dog

thrust its jaw forward a bit, and drooled”). Binsse’s version is not only needlessly explicit, but substantively altered: “As a mouthful of nourishment was gulped down [in Roy’s version, the food is still visible, thereby exciting the Pavlovian response], each dog drew back his chops a trifle [an action impossible to visualize: could Binsse have meant “baring his teeth”?], and drops of saliva [could not Roy’s “salivait” been meant to designate one long drool?] fell onto the snow” [a picturesque detail, but it does not appear in the original] (*HM* 36-37). A final example comes from *Alexandre Chenevert*, when a doctor palpates the thin main character (“Il palpa le corps maigre” 155). This statement apparently lacked sufficient pathos for Binsse who first translated it precisely — “He palpated the thin body” — then added the poignant appositive “bereft of beauty” (*TC* 102). As all of these examples make clear, Roy trusted her readers to make inferences and to draw their own conclusions; Binsse did not.

Although Binsse’s goal was to make his English sing the same song as Roy’s French, in places his translations fall short of the mark because of their awkwardness. Some anglophone students mistakenly fault Roy for these gaucheries, but a comparison of what she wrote with Binsse’s stilted equivalents soon uncovers the root of the problem. A doctor puzzled by Alexandre Chenevert “essayait de [le] déchiffrer” (*AC* 159), that is, he tried to figure Alexandre out, but Binsse has this doctor attempting to “unravel” the patient, as if he were a ragged sock (*TC* 106). Certain signboards in the same novel “proposaient” (257), or “advertised,” two hundred rooms with running water; in Binsse’s version, these signs “prated” of two hundred rooms (171), a personification that is far too alive. Another example of unidiomatic English is found in Binsse’s rendering of Odette’s impassioned response to the idea of injustice — “Ses narines très fines frémissaient d’indignation” (*RD* 22): “Her thin-drawn nostrils were constantly pulsing with indignation” (*SR* 16). In English, nostrils do not “pulse” with indignation; they “quiver.” Equally startling is his representation, also found in *Street of Riches*, of sweet peas that climbed over a fence as having “clambered” on it (*RD* 117). Similarly, in that same book, a house is said to be “isolée” on the outskirts of the village, “mais, il est vrai, accompagnée de deux petits arbres tristes” (254), that is, “isolated but, if truth be told, with two miserable little trees for company.” Binsse depicts the house as “set off ... but — it’s true — escorted by two sad small trees” (240-41), a line whose verb, “escorted,” astonishingly sets both the house and the trees in motion.

Other stumbling blocks come to mind. For example, Binsse contorts a statement made by Christine's mother that her daughter did not have to go out and earn a living "de n'importe quelle façon" (*RD* 252) ("in any old way at all") into the oddity of "nor yet at haphazard" (*SR* 239), an expression that is not at home in English. The French idiom "sourire dans sa barbe," as in "Le père Joseph-Marie souriait dans sa barbe" (*PP* 203), could appropriately have been rendered, "Father Joseph-Marie laughed up his sleeve," but instead it is converted into the following clumsy Gallicism: "Father Joseph-Marie smiled in his beard" (*WN* 184). As both his theory of translation and his more successful exercises of that art show, Binsse did not seek to introduce a foreign element into the target language. Given that he was French Canadian himself, such slips as the example just given more likely resulted from his thinking in French. Another awkward locution is found in his representation of Christine and her snowbound friends contemplating a winter storm. The French reads as follows: "Tous les quatre, rapprochés, nous avons longtemps scruté cette houle de neige" (*RD* 233) ("Huddled together, the four of us looked long and hard at this blizzard"). The English text misses an essential point, as the incorrect appositive shows: "The four of us, studious together, long stared into this whirlpool of snow" (*SR* 220).

The subject of snowstorms brings to mind the most famous mistranslation extant in Roy's works: Hannah Josephson's rendering the word "poudrerie" in *The Tin Flute* as "gunpowder works." Both Binsse and Roy comment illuminatingly on this error, their observations providing a standard against which to measure Binsse's own attempt in *Street of Riches* to convey this tricky word. When in *Bonheur d'occasion* nature unleashed a *poudrerie*, that is, a tingling storm of fine powdery snow, Josephson thought that a pile of gunpowder had exploded. Years later, Roy still felt mortified that she had failed to catch this disastrous error at the proofreading stage. As she stated in a letter of 4 April 1972 to Joyce Marshall, she wished that it could even now be emended: "In any case something should be done, at least about such things as 'poudrerie,' our lovely Canadianism for blizzard which has become in *The Tin Flute* the powder works exploded. I am to blame up to a point, but I was given twelve hours to read and correct the manuscript, and it was my first attempt at a job that you and I have learned to look upon as one of the most difficult."⁶ In his essay on Roy, Binsse points out that such a "truly spec-

tacular boner ... [is] likely to occur when an unwary translator is dealing with Canadian French, in which certain words unfortunately do not mean what they do in France" (2). He comments on the mistake at length, punctuating the glaring errors in Josephson's text with two indignant *sic's* (although his own carelessness in misspelling "aperture" obviously escaped him):

One of these words is *poudrerie*, which in Canada signifies the minutely fine snow driven along by a strong, cold, northerly wind, stinging the human skin and filtering through even the slightest of cracks and apertures [sic]. In France the word means something rather different. Chapter XII of *The Tin Flute* begins with a blustery day in late winter. "... Early that afternoon a bank of clouds settled on the south slope of the mountain and the wind swept down on Saint-Henri in the valley. Toward eight o'clock [sic] in the evening the powderworks exploded [sic!]. Loose shutters banged; from the roofs of houses came the sound of tin being ripped off ..." which is all the more startling since neither before nor after, in the whole length of the book, is there any slightest mention of a powderworks. But naturally, *la poudrerie éclata* ... (2).

Yet for all his perceptive commentary on Hannah Josephson's gaffe, Binsse's own attempt to translate the phenomenon of the "*poudrerie*" (RD 225) into good English with the phrase "this powdering gale" (SR 212) proved inadequate. Grasping for the right equivalent to "poudrerie," he would likely have concurred with Roy that translation was indeed a "most difficult" job.

In places it seems as if Binsse is so intent on imparting a literary or elegant tone to his translation that he misses obvious possibilities. The site of the Tousignant home in *La petite poule d'eau*, for instance, is a remote outpost: "Rien ne ressemble davantage au fin fond du bout du monde" (12), that is, "Nothing more closely resembled the very ends of the earth." The suicidal overtones of Binsse's "image of the final jumping-off place" (WH 10) are disturbing. One wonders why Roy suffered this complication of her plain and common phrase. On at least two occasions in English, after all, she herself capably expressed the very same idea. Writing to Joyce Marshall on 23 November 1973, she confessed to "a desire to fly — or flee — to the utmost end of the earth" (Marshall). Even more pertinent was her description in an interview with Donald Cameron of the Water Hen island as being "way out at the end of the world" (*Conversa-*

tions 139). Ironically, Binsse's awkward phrasing in this case was at variance with Roy's diction in English as well as in French.

Of all Binsse's professional objectives, his pledge of "subtracting nothing" would seem to be the easiest to satisfy. Even a casual reading, however, reveals omissions, both large and small, in all of his books. The delinquent schoolteacher in *La petite poule d'eau*, for example, is extravagant in awarding holidays to the children so that he might go hunting or fishing ("Il était très prodigue de congés" 113), a line that is completely left out of the English version. A greater omission occurs in *The Hidden Mountain* when the old gold miner Gédéon prepares to go to bed. Before he blows out his candle, in the French text, he performs the following actions, all of which are entirely missing in English:

Sur le bord du grabat, il s'assit, enleva une bottine trouée presque autant que sa vieille passoire. Il écouta. Que quelqu'un à cette heure puisse encore venir, lui-même n'y pouvait vraiment croire. Mais l'habitude est là, d'écouter, d'attendre. Il enleva l'autre bottine.

Demain alors! Demain peut-être? (14)

(He sat down on the edge of his pallet, took off a work boot that was almost as full of holes as his old sieve. He listened. That any one at this hour was likely to come, he couldn't really believe. But he had made listening and waiting a habit. He took off the other boot. Tomorrow then! Perhaps tomorrow?)

Elsewhere in this book, the great art teacher Augustin Meyrand is looking critically at a sketch of Pierre's "that had so deeply moved the old missionary. It did carry you away" (142). In the source text, sandwiched in between the word "missionary" and the next line, one finds another omitted paragraph:

[une pochade] que Stanislas aussi, la veille, avait regardée avec un trouble bizarre.

— Qu'est-ce que cela? fit-il, faisant mine de ne pas voir en quel sens il fallait regarder le petit tableau.

Puis il devint silencieux. Les paupières plissées, clignant un peu de l'oeil pour centrer sa vision, il regardait la pochade. (MS 172)

([a sketch] that Stanislas also, the previous evening, had contemplated with a quizzical and troubled air. What is that? he asked, pretending not to know how to interpret the small image.

Then he fell silent. Squinting, with one eye shut in order to focus better, he looked at the sketch.)

Later on in the same story, Pierre goes into isolation in order to paint without distraction. As Binsse relates it, “The master kept asking for news of him, was alarmed at not seeing him. Yet surely it was to deserve better of his master that Pierre was keeping to himself ” (170). What Binsse omits is Pierre’s uneasy reaction to the thought of his teacher’s anxiety on his behalf: “Pierre prenait alors la mine d’un enfant qui se sent ingrat et coupable” (*MS* 203), that is, “Pierre looked like a child who feels ungrateful and guilty.” An important aspect of character is once again forfeited.

Such omissions may seem minor, and yet no detail of the original text is expendable. In *Alexandre Chenevert*, for example, the main character is unduly preoccupied with both “Les manchettes et les sous-titres des journaux” (11), that is, both the headlines and the sub-titles of newspapers, but Binsse compresses both nouns in the abbreviated phrase “Today’s headlines” (*TC* 4). Perhaps he found Roy’s conjoined “headlines and subtitles” redundant. However, “subtitles” are not the same as “headlines,” and Roy’s desire to indicate both the large banner and the small summary beneath it should have been respected. Since she clearly wanted to demonstrate how the unassimilable volume of facts reported by the media was unsettling her hero, her addition of “et les sous-titres” was functional, and Binsse’s omission of it more of a loss than he may have realized. Also left out was a public notice that appears almost surrealistic to the print-weary Alexandre: “Un peu plus haut, des caractères énormes qui invitaient: Lunchez rafraîchi” (123). Translated, the sentence reads as follows: “A little higher up, written in huge letters, was an invitation: Take a refreshing lunch break.” All printed words came to be Alexandre’s private nightmare. Their effect on his distraught mind is cumulative and depends on every single inclusion.

How indispensable Roy’s details were becomes yet more apparent when one examines another gap, this one in *Rue Deschambault*, when Christine’s mother travels to Saskatchewan to prevent her elder daughter who works there from making a bad marriage. The mother’s facial expressions mirror perfectly how she means to deal with the stubborn girl: “Assise sur la banquette de peluche, maman de temps en temps prenait un air fâché; elle nouait ses sourcils; elle remuait les lèvres comme pour un discours tout en reproches. Ensuite, elle devait se rappeler ce que mon père avait dit: de la douceur ... d’être patiente ... car elle passait à un air suppliant, variment très malheureux” (49).

Binsse depicts these mimes as follows: “Propped against her plush seat, from time to time Maman assumed a look of wrath; she moved her lips as though framing a speech filled with reproaches. Then she must have recalled what my father had said: ‘Gentleness ... be patient ...’ for she shifted to an imploring expression truly most sorrowful” (*SR* 42). What he leaves out is the sentence “elle nouait ses sourcils” (she knit her brows”). The humour of Maman’s rehearsal for the upcoming confrontation depends upon her striking, in succession, a variety of dramatic poses. They are all essential to the success of that comedy, and the loss of even one diminishes it.

At the end of this same book, another interesting detail is sacrificed through Binsse’s neglect. In the passage in question, Christine’s friendship with Madame Toupin, her landlady, is said to develop in a strange way (“d’une manière un peu étrange” 255). The “strangeness” is Madame Toupin’s gift for fortune-telling which she uses to predict Christine’s future. Binsse’s exclusion of this adverbial phrase robs the sentence both of momentary suspense and of its oblique censure of this unorthodox practice.

Because *Where Nests the Water Hen* is one of Roy’s most beloved works of fiction, any restoration of its omitted lines would be cause for rejoicing among her anglophone admirers. A case in point is the delightful scene, left out of Binsse’s translation entirely, in which both Luzina and her husband Hippolyte manage a shaky laugh at a trying moment. The context is daughter Josephine’s imminent departure for a convent located in the south of the province. In these lines, which appear only in the French text, a tearful Luzina prepares Joséphine’s wardrobe:

Comme elle [Luzina] reniflait beaucoup en taillant la robe de couvent de Joséphine, Hippolyte crut qu’elle avait le rhume et l’engagea à placer sa machine à coudre plus près du pôle. Il avait voulu dire: le poêle, et l’expression les fit tous rire, même Luzina qui avait tant d’aversion en ce moment envers le pôle. (141)

(Because she [Luzina] sniffled a great deal while making Josephine’s convent dress, Hippolyte believed that she must have a cold and so tried to persuade her to place her sewing machine nearer the “pole.” He actually meant to say “poêle,” that is “stove,” and his slip of the tongue made them all laugh, even Luzina, who at that moment felt a great deal of animosity for the “pole.”)

Roy declines to elaborate upon why the family found Hippolyte’s accidental

use of “pôle” for “poêle” so amusing. A possible hint may be found earlier in this section, when the last teacher to visit the island, Armand Dubreuil, reads to the family huddled about the “poêle” the story of a fateful expedition to the North Pole in which, to Luzina’s distress, all the adventurers perished. Now she is about to lose her precious daughter to the lure of education down in the south of the province. Throughout this part of the book Roy emphasizes how the children’s migration to educational centres down south leads to the dissolution of the family. To Luzina, the village of Saint Jean Baptiste, where Josephine is headed, no doubt seems as tragically distant as the South Pole. No wonder, then, that Luzina detests the unhappy associations clustered around the words “poêle” — which would be the equivalent in their rough dwelling of a hearth — when it is transformed by a slip of the tongue into “pôle,” the far-off destination that calls her children away from that “poêle,” or symbol of family unity.

What got lost in Harry Lorin Binsse’s translations of Gabrielle Roy should be patently clear. As E.D. Blodgett remarks, the author has been “translated so assiduously that it often takes [her readers] a long time to discover that her novels, Englished as *The Tin Flute* and *Where Nests the Water Hen* (to name the most English), were composed in French. That may be a translator’s ideal, but it is assimilation with a vengeance” (26-27). Yet Binsse’s work is far from being a complete failure. His overall achievement should be judged in the context of his own frank statement that all translations are imperfect, his own included: “Sometimes you succeed, more often you fail, and the best general average you can hope for is not to build barriers” (9). Roy’s wide and appreciative English readership is proof that Binsse erected no barriers; on the contrary, for them his work constituted a welcome point of entry into the original texts. Yet all translations have to be assessed and eventually remade. The comparative reader must ever be at once generous and exacting, trusting and suspicious, forgiving yet critical. No translation can ever be considered definitive. Perhaps the general editor of the Penguin Press experiment with Proust’s work is right to assume that several persons are needed to translate a complex work. The more voices, then, that interpret Gabrielle Roy to a non French-speaking world, the better; and that chorus includes the bold performance of Harry Lorin Binsse, wrong notes, missed bars, and all.

NOTES

¹ The copyright for all unpublished materials that are housed in the Gabrielle Roy Papers at the National Library of Canada belongs to the Fonds Gabrielle Roy, to whom I am indebted for permission to quote.

² "Gabrielle Roy," 9. Gabrielle Roy Papers, National Library of Canada.

³ Unless otherwise indicated, all translations in parentheses are mine.

⁴ The titles of Gabrielle Roy's frequently quoted novels, both French and English, will be indicated in parentheses by the use of initials.

⁵ In *La petite poule d'eau*, for example, the narrator observes that Luzina's closest neighbours are "des métis du nom de Mackenzie" (154). In the same paragraph Luzina tries to interest them in sending their children to her school in order that the government might provide a teacher, even though their youngsters strike her as unsuitable: "Presque de petits sauvages, demi-nus, barbouillés, qui parlaient on ne savait quelle langue ..." (155). Binsse calls the Mackenzies "halfbreeds" (*WN* 139), but omits the word "sauvages" altogether, replacing it by a pronoun instead: "They were almost wholly wild, half naked, grimy, speaking the Lord knew what language" (140). In so doing, he fails to convey the full extent of Luzina's limited perspective. Elsewhere, Luzina and her husband reflect on the work of the missionaries who had come to their island "pour évangéliser, civiliser, soustraire les sauvages à l'exploitation des marchands de fourrures. Non pas pour s'enrichir" (58). Here too Binsse substitutes "Indians" for the offending word: "men who came here to evangelize and civilize the Indians and to rescue them from the fur traders' exploitation, not to enrich themselves" (51). Again, Roy may have intended to allow her characters this unenlightened usage, even in their train of thought, to capture the Eurocentric view of aboriginals that was common at the time.

⁶ Joyce Marshall Papers, Bishop's University Archives, Bishop's University, Lennoxville, Quebec. I wish to thank Bishop's University Archives for permission to quote from this collection.

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