

## History's Absent Hand

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Volume 39, Number 2, 2014

URI: [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl39\\_2art05](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl39_2art05)

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Publisher(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0380-6995 (print)

1718-7850 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Wiesenthal, C. (2014). History's Absent Hand: Lessons in Modes of (Textual) Production from Gaétan Soucy's *The Little Girl Who Was Too Fond of Matches*. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 39(2), 80–105.

# History's Absent Hand: Lessons in Modes of (Textual) Production from Gaétan Soucy's *The Little Girl Who Was Too Fond of Matches*

CHRISTINE WIESENTHAL

## To Strike a Match

Gaétan Soucy's *La petite fille qui aimait trop les allumettes* first appeared in 1998; two years later the novel was translated into English by Sheila Fischman as *The Little Girl Who Was Too Fond of Matches*. Soucy's first-person tale unfolds simultaneously as an assigned secretarial duty, a confessional diary, a talismanic "book of spells," a direct apostrophe to the narrator's beloved, an infernal "gospel of . . . hell," and a "blasted last will and testament" (3, 135, 134).<sup>1</sup> The voice that addresses us, from the ruins of a family estate in some nameless grey countryside, is similarly complex: difficult to pinpoint in space and time, it speaks in an oddly extravagant pastiche of stylized "days of yore" (3), private euphemism, poetic neologism, inadvertent malapropism, comically blunt literalism, and snatches of contemporary slang — a peculiar mishmash of heterogeneous literary sources, generic discourses, linguistic temporalities, and cultural codes.<sup>2</sup> Arresting in its strangeness, the narrative voice is also, from the start, unmistakably self-conscious of its estrangement in language, constantly aware of possible failures in comprehension and intelligibility. Because the novel is focalized through the consciousness of a narrator who inhabits language so tentatively, its plot and dramatic situation unfold for the most part obliquely, presented only indirectly via image or allusion or dispensed with altogether. For much of *La petite fille/The Little Girl*, the reader is thus left groping, as it were, in the dark.<sup>3</sup>

Not only challenging, Soucy's tale is also profoundly disturbing. At the story's outset, the narrator's father has just committed suicide, leaving two siblings to fend for themselves. As we gradually learn, the father's self-destruction marks the end of a bizarre, sadomasochistic rule

that has “controlled everything” on the isolated family estate where the siblings have been kept sequestered (3). With the collapse of the perverse symbolic order represented by the father, the narrator is left “to take the universe in hand, my brother and I” (3). Raised to believe herself a boy — her telltale bodily “inflations” notwithstanding — the “I” who addresses us is eventually revealed to be Alice, a teenager about to give birth to a child of rape by the same brother invoked in the novel’s opening sentence. Oblivious to her brutalization and isolated, semi-feral asociality, Alice is by turns philosophical and (terribly) funny about “the nature of the jam” that she and her brother are in once “faced with the *fait accompli* of papa’s corpse” (88). Over the course of her narrative — a two-part structure that spans a time frame of two days — she “rememories” her family past in fragmentary fits and starts, a recollection scripted with vivid help from the “dictionaries” or books that she has internalized. It is a family history warped beyond all recognition by the siblings’ now “defunct” papa, a figure seemingly omnipotent to his children but in truth a man rendered wholly impotent by an unbearable, uncontainable pain.

The agony perverting this insular family microcosm is ultimately traceable to a tragedy caused years ago by a third sibling, Alice’s twin sister. Playing with matches at the age of four, this twin, Ariane, accidentally started a fire, maiming her and killing their mother. Maddened by grief, the father thereupon banishes Ariane to the dark “vault” of a woodshed on the estate. There, as “fair punishment” for her fatal attraction to fire, he has kept her confined, along with the corpse of her mother (the latter carefully preserved in a “glass box” [116]). Also placed in the vault, “out of reach . . . of course, but where [Ariane] could still see them as symbols and remember them and draw a lesson from them,” is a box of matches (134). This long-ago incendiary event is thus ultimately revealed as “cette étrange méprise au coeur du roman,” in the words of Bertrand Gervais (384), and the monitory matchbox figures in effect as the Pandora’s box of Soucy’s tale.

Referred to throughout only as “the Fair Punishment,” Ariane’s existence as a human being is disclosed only at the novel’s climax (which features a second conflagration). Largely because readers come to apprehend the horrific details of Alice’s actual situation only as “slowly as molasses” (115), the shocking sensationalism of the novel’s Gothic undergirding is skilfully baffled. Nevertheless, it soon becomes clear

that Soucy's text presents a nightmarish subversion of the fairy-tale mode, particularly of the "favorite" courtly romance story that Alice recounts early on: "The story must have taken place in the real world somewhere, sometime, you see. In it there was a princess in a tower, prisoner of what you call a mad monk, and there was the handsome knight who came and saved her and carried her off on a steed" (11).

The romance fable elements highlighted by the text's title and plot, together with the dark psychodrama of family history that plays out through that plot, have directed much of the critical uptake on *La petite fille/The Little Girl* to date. It is, for example, through the generic conventions of "both a fairy tale and a trauma narrative" that Lauren Choplin maps the novel's representation of violence (169). Nicole Côté has examined "the death economy of female desire" in the text (157), while Maité Snauwaert has offered a valuable analysis of the extended trope of the "family romance" by situating Soucy's novel in the broader literary and historical context of "le roman de filiation québécois contemporain" (105).<sup>4</sup> In an important early critical response, Bertrand Gervais reads the text through a subtle poststructuralist psychoanalytic lens, tracing "d'un processus de désémiotisation": a discourse that ultimately disintegrates to envision a psychological apocalypse or "imaginaire de la fin" (386).

Yet for all its resonance as memoir of trauma, desire, family dysfunction, and symbolic decomposition — and for all its otherworldly Gothic fairy-tale setting, "somewhere, sometime" (9), "once upon a time" (90) — the narrative of Alice, "the countess de soissons" (136), hinges as crucially on material details connected to a "real world" as it does on tropes of the Gothic, the Freudian family romance, or the Lacanian Imaginary. Notably, in its pointed presentation of a universe characterized above all by what the Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch termed *ungleichzeitigkeit* — or the "non-simultaneity of the simultaneous" (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 307) — the novel offers a vision that is definitely as much "about" history in the broadest theoretical sense as it is "about" one specific family history or Alice's subjective interiority and/or the reader's psyche. Whereas Aurélien Boivin gestures at a historical dimension of the text in his attempt to read it as an allegory of the Duplessis years leading to Quebec's Quiet Revolution, I want to suggest, more broadly, that it is through its seemingly strange temporal contradictions and dislocations that Soucy's novel reproblematises history as a

process of “(non)synchronous contradiction” or the residual persistence of an “uncompleted past which has not yet been ‘sublated’ by capitalism itself” (Bloch, “Nonsynchronism” 31). In so doing, Alice’s narrative offers a re-enactment of a paradigmatic “revolutionary” shift, one that stages history as a social formation *permanently* marked by “the overlay and structural coexistence of *several* modes of production all at once,” an allegory ultimately epochal in scope (Jameson, *Political* 95, 97).

The text’s preoccupation with historical forms of material production and “real” estate, moreover, functions as a crucial precondition of its final and most singularly unsettling revelations, when Alice makes some essential disclosures about her own writing or “method of scribbling”: that is, her mode of *textual* production. These disclosures include the fact that, as she reveals toward the end, she has resorted to writing her diary in a scribble “with just one letter, a cursive *l*” (134). Although readers such as Lauren Choplin have noted that this “last move” by Soucy confronts readers with the theoretical impossibility of “the text in front of us,” the implications of this final “shift” from the level of “Alice’s interiority” to that of surface textuality (179) deserve closer inquiry, especially in relation to the novel’s non-synchronous “fantastic historiography” (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 368). For though the *content* of the novel’s plot traces a story of origins that leads back to a clear and *present* cause (the Fair Punishment’s tragic fondness for matches), it is precisely the story of the text’s own origins that is occluded from readers’ view. The novel’s very form in this sense enacts, in effect, a theory of history as an unclear and *absent* cause, of history as the thing “inaccessible to us except in textual form” (Jameson, *Political* 35).

What “lessons” might we “draw” from Soucy’s parable in this regard? Most obviously, perhaps, the text’s ultimate emphasis on the status of its own fiction abruptly subverts the transference drama that the narrative has all along lured readers into, as a powerful trauma memoir. But insofar as this moment also posits another hand behind the text’s origin — the necessarily missing hand behind its own history — it also raises questions of mediation and translatability that anticipate the artful hand of Sheila Fischman in *The Little Girl Who Was Too Fond of Matches*. In this sense, Fischman’s English retextualization of Soucy materially enacts questions related to the work of “the invisible translator” (to paraphrase Lawrence Venuti’s title [2008]), questions which otherwise remain largely implicit in the French novel’s form. As a mode of produc-

tion invoked by the very premise of the novel, but also performed by the hand of Fischman, translation arises at various levels as a question integrally linked to “real world” issues of *immaterial* forms of property: namely, to problems of authority and *literary* “estate.”

Finally, in the unknowable breach of its transmission from “cursive” manuscript to the typescript “text before us” (Choplin 179), the novel ultimately comes as a reminder that shifts in media technology — specifically, here, the shift from writing to print — are themselves inherently translational processes, the transposition of “one kind of knowledge into another mode” (McLuhan 56). And in this most basic fact related to the production and transmission of this complex fable lies perhaps a final, latent, though timely lesson for the twenty-first century into which the book was launched. For both Alice’s emphasis on a “method” of production that privileges speed, and her narrative’s ultimate translation from manuscript to typescript, speak to features of our own “postliterate” culture (McLuhan 16), an era when among those things perhaps becoming history is precisely the old technology of the “cursive” hand itself.

But first we need to strike a match and orient ourselves in Soucy’s dark world, a world at once all the more elusive, and yet otherwise illuminating, in English.

### Materials for a Fable of Non-Synchronous History

The broken pocket watch produced at the opening of Alice’s narrative comes as an early indication that one of the things that does not function predictably in this world is time: her universe is one that we have “to take in hand” with a handless timepiece, a “watch that had lost its hands in days of yore” (3). The odd mixture of archaism and contemporary idiom that quickly comes to characterize her voice also reveals the decidedly strange “objective” world around Alice, a “worldness” that in its material detail suggests everything from a feudal romance to a modern, bureaucratic, industrial state.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, the novel’s setting tends to unsettle any easy grasp of a narrative present. What time is *now*? On the one hand, this narrative “now” has been described as “quasi-medieval” (Howells and Kröller 646): Alice, her “kid brother” (98), and assorted, wandering livestock live on a manor estate where the plow is wooden, music is made with “fifes, the flipple flute, and

the tambourine” (41), and Alice’s first reference is to a “very pretty” manuscript scroll “that goes back centuries or more” (4). Conjuring all the symbolic keynotes of the romance fable and its feudal social origins, the siblings’ manor estate or “kingdom” (120) is separated from a village by a pine grove, a magical space of “unobtrusive divinity” for Alice (64).

But that her “now” is a complex “universe” composed of “the coexistence of realities from radically different moments of history” (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 307) is also suggested by her “manor house” itself. A grotesque example of the “architectural uncanny” (see Vidler), this “quasi-medieval” manor is also coded to standards of neo-classical aristocratic luxury, with all its attendant implications of distinctly decadent landed wealth. It is an opulence by now run to mildewed and blasted ruin: the mansion’s once splendid features — its belvedere railings, “monumental library” (82), portrait gallery, “vast mirrored” ball room (78), grand piano — are a wreck, warped and befouled by the elements. Its magnificent chandeliers, now fallen to the marble floors in bunches, make Alice think of “overripe fruit” or “some disembowelled fly, its guts full of eggs” (79). It “is a veritable goldmine for little creatures” that live and die among the “rot and corruption lying around everywhere” (89). The same “manor house” that invokes the medieval origins of romance thus also clearly signals — like Poe’s House of Usher — the decline and fall of a “rotten” aristocracy in the centuries to follow, and the physical “corruption” of the family’s grand ancestral home, its advanced state of decay, insinuates — like Wilde’s *Dorian Gray* — *fin de siècle* forms of “degeneracy” among Alice’s folk, the suicidal, insane, incestuous, “soissons de coëtherlant” kin.

If Alice’s Gothic “manor estate” thus simultaneously evokes the past of a specifically decadent aristocracy, then this is a temporality also reinforced throughout by the distinct period style of the prose memoirist whom Alice most consciously seeks to emulate, the “duc de saint-simon” (Louis de Rouvroy, 1675-1755). It is to this embodiment of French Regency classicism that Alice in fact claims literary kinship at the very moment that she is first able to identify herself by a family name, as she tours the portrait gallery of her ancestors.<sup>6</sup> She admires the eighteenth-century “duc” of the “sun king” court (99) for his “thunderous language” (73), his “extraordinary stories” (73), and most of all for his over-the-top, firecracker “syntax” (11), which “shoots up to its summit like farts from a burning log, I beg you to believe me” (73).

Both the duc's rhetorical and his historical example as a gossipy court memoirist — and staunch proponent of a France ruled by the nobility — reinforce the political subtext of a “slutty” or scandalous nobility that runs throughout Soucy's novel. As with the uncanny architecture of their manor estate, the duc helps to cloak the “soissons de coëtherlants” (77) in the aura of the *ancien régime*, a distinctly debased past of “sun king” excess and entitlement (99).

So, despite the Fair Warning of the broken pocket watch at the outset, it is still somehow surprising to realize that the century of Alice's “now” is actually early twentieth century. In this narrative present, her papa's “magical generator” turns out to be a record player (39); the archetypal village beyond the forest turns out to be Saint Aldor, which boasts a “*General Store*” (32), a funeral home (“a special death shop” [34]), a lawyer's office, and policemen toting pistols. The “handsome knight” who, according to Alice's favorite romance story, is supposed to play the role of saviour to her imprisoned “princess” (9) turns out to be a professional “engineer” (112) and a “mine inspector” (51); the noble “steed” that he does eventually attempt to “carr[y] her off on” is in fact a motorcycle (110). And, as for the apparently medieval/neo-classical Gothic manor estate, *that*, it turns out, is a “veritable goldmine” for more than just “little creatures.” It is a “veritable goldmine” period. Alice intermittently conveys a vague sense of her father's wealth and hints in her “re-memories” at some sort of business transactions — he keeps big registers locked away and has “pouches packed with cents” (“He had a lot and I think he used to go somewhere now and again to stock up”) (12). Incrementally, it becomes clear that her “papa” (22), the former “priest” and overlord who “controlled everything” on the estate, was also “mister soissons” (25) to the local townsfolk: a successful capitalist “doing big business” (22) as “the owner of the mine” (25). Among the riches hoarded by the father are “ingots” presumably produced by his “mine,” which he piles into crates kept locked away in the ballroom: “[I]t may be because of those ingots, in fact,” Alice muses, “that papa flatly forbade us to set foot in [that] room” (83). It is, then, as the heiress to some booming industrial means of production that Alice now confronts a modern world of “strange birds papa called bearoplanes” (110) and of townsfolk for whom “the fact that my late father was the owner of the mine” is a matter of “serious” concern (50-51).



The multiple temporalities marbling Soucy's fictional "universe" signal more than merely an atmospheric sense of layered "historicity": they point precisely, instead, to a vision of history as a process of *ungleichzeitig* or simultaneously "non-synchronous" realities. Initially theorized by Bloch in an attempt to explain the traction of National Socialism in Germany during the 1930s, the paradox of *ungleichzeitigkeit*, or "the non-simultaneity of the simultaneous," attempts to capture the "continuing influence of older circumstances and forms of production, however much they have been crossed through" by the emergent or modern: "The objectively non-contemporaneous element is that which is distant from and alien to the present; it thus embraces declining remnants and above all an unrefurbished past which is not yet 'resolved' in capitalist terms. . . . [Such elements] are contradictions to the capitalist Now and elements of ancient society which have not yet died" (108-09).<sup>7</sup> Jameson, building on Bloch, elaborates: "[E]very social formation or historically existing society has in fact consisted in the overlay and structural coexistence of several modes of production all at once, including vestiges and survivals of older modes of production now relegated to structurally dependent positions within the new" (*Political* 95). Whether we speak with Bloch of such uneven rates of socio-economic development as a "landscape" with "fields of a different Irratio" (103), or with Jameson in terms of the "coexistence of various synchronic systems of modes of production, each with its own dynamic or time scheme — a kind of metasynchronicity, if one likes" (*Political* 97), the applicability of such simultaneous yet non-contemporaneous "time schemes" to Soucy's modernized romance fable is evident. Indeed, the very temporal dislocations that mark in one respect the novel as fantastically otherworldly or dreamlike in their apparent disjuncture can be apprehended in this regard precisely *as* the manifestations of its deeply imaginative engagement with the structure of history itself — nothing if not a complicated kind of "real" estate, "crisscrossed and intersected by a variety of impulses from contradictory modes of production all at once" (Jameson, *Political* 95).

Alice, in this respect, presents a textbook example of Bloch's first premise: "[N]ot all people exist in the same now" (97). As the product of one of those "remnants" of "ancient society which have not yet died," she and her brother — ironically "to the manor born" in the traditional

sense — have been brought up as though under feudal conditions of absolute rule by their father, who even caricatures the performance of *noblesse oblige* in his “inconceivable” (24) acts of “solicitude” (23) for the beggar man. A cul-de-sac of the unfinished, premodern past, the world of the manor estate represents in effect another form of “stoppit,” Alice’s term for the family predisposition to catatonic fits or “spells” that suspend all “notion of time” (44). To the degree that Alice and her brother in their isolated “kingdom” thus reflect elements of an “unrefurbished past which is not yet ‘resolved’” or “sublated by capitalism” (Bloch, “Nonsynchronism” 31), their alienation from the money economy that structures the world around them is a principal sign of their alienation from — or “objective non-contemporaneity” to — the present. This is highlighted from the start as the siblings sit with a “pouch packed with cents” (12) and grapple with the question of “whether we had enough cents” “to buy papa a pine suit” (i.e., coffin). In order “to take the universe in hand” (3), the first task for Alice is to figure out what it actually means to take *money* “in hand,” as she literally has by the end of the first chapter, left sitting alone at the kitchen table “turning the coins over and over in my fingers” (14).

As Part I of Alice’s narrative traces her journey to the outside world of the village to purchase the “pine suit” for papa, the non-synchronous or *ungleichzeitig* “contradictions of the traditional to the capitalist Now” are also set on a collision course (Bloch 109). In this regard, the first half of the novel — one day in the narrative time scheme — charts an extended lesson in failure at basic commodity exchange or the incomplete diffusion of commodity capitalism to the outer reaches of Alice’s time-stopped world. A reluctant envoy to the village to begin with, Alice is unable of course to negotiate any transaction for a coffin. Instead, she unceremoniously crashes a funeral under way in the village and is then apprehended by local officials, including her beloved “mine inspector,” the poetry-reading engineer who works for her father. It is he who informs Alice that her father’s “death was going to cause changes”: “There would be all sorts of problems with the inheritance. . . . The law would take charge of the matter et cetera and we, my brother and I, would be at the mercy of all those [towns]people” (62-63).

Then the inspector delivered the final blow by saying, in a way that could drill a hole in your chest just like that:

“I doubt if your brother and you will be able to go on living on your estate.”

In a flash I was out of the room. (63)

Alice disappears at these words, running “full tilt through the village all the way to the edge of . . . the pine grove,” where she flings her bag of money away: “I pitched, yes that’s the word, I pitched the cents bag into the thicket and flung three gobs of spit after it to ward off evil spells” (63). Money, exchange value, “the law” of property, “et cetera” ultimately make no “cents” to Alice as a genuinely non-synchronous “remnant” of an older and more magical mode of “being and consciousness” (Bloch 106); modern society remains as unintelligible to her as she is to it. But the crucial element in the fable of history as it unfolds here is not so much the fact that Alice remains thus far unassimilated by capitalism as the fact that she and her brother are also, of course, *simultaneously* and irrevocably interpellated by that system as the heirs of their local economy’s major means of production, sitting as they are on their “veritable goldmine.” As Jameson notes, following Bloch, it is precisely capitalism’s “vocation,” as an emerging “cultural dominant,” “to subdue and incorporate” the older, “resistant and heterogeneous forces” with which it coexists (*Postmodernism* 159).

In the latter half of Alice’s account, then, the siblings’ predicament contracts to one of defending the premodern enclave of their “estate” against the encroachments of modernity: “[W]hat would become of us . . . [i]f it should happen that we could no longer live on our land?” (87). Alice clings to her landed estate not because she perceives it as a source of wealth but because emplacement is the only measure of “value” meaningful to her. In fact, the only trauma that she recognizes as such is dispossession of her “estate.” This she ultimately claims as a birth-right in no uncertain terms: “[W]hat right has anyone to tear the countess of Soissons away from this land that belongs to her through all the nooks and crannies of her fiery flesh?” (136). In claiming “this land that belongs to her” on the basis of hereditary noble status, Alice not only invokes the obsolete aristocratic order that defines her but also reverts to a rhetoric of feudal class warfare that paradoxically casts the villagers, the very forces of modernization, as vandalizing peasant “hordes”: “They’ll come to our property in gangs! Entire hordes . . . ! They’ll take everything away from us!” (71-72). Or, again: “Hordes would come to us from the village, ignorant of our customs, respecting nothing, understanding

even less, frothing at the snout, agitated and stupid as flies, and they would dispossess us completely: of our estate, my dictionaries, the Fair Punishment too” (95).

Alice’s brother meanwhile mobilizes forces to drive the villagers away by getting drunk, loading a “cannon” (i.e., a rifle), and, in a feint of bravado, propping mannequins armed with broomsticks and mops along the manor belvederes (99-100). Installing himself as “raining king” (104) of the estate, complete with a faux throne, he undertakes a drunken performance of doomed aristocratic resistance against the insurgent “horde” of townfolk (“there must have been a good dozen of them” in the end [124]) and almost pushes the novel beyond parody into farce. Both his murder of Alice’s “handsome prince,” the engineer, and his final self-abasement before the villagers — “kneeling at [their] feet with his shoulders on the ground and his hole in the air” (125) — are, however, searingly unfunny outcomes of the “revolutionary” conflict that comes to a head between the respective historical formations represented by the “soisson de coëtherlants” and Saint Aldor’s “villagers.”

With the siblings on the brink of imminent dispossession of their “manor estate,” Soucy’s text ultimately presents an allegory of that “transitional moment” in which distinct “modes of production or moments of socioeconomic development” encounter one another in open antagonism and “in which a new systemic dominant gains ascendancy” (Jameson, *Political* 97). On the most obvious level, the novel rehearses that particular historical shift implied by its specific range of period detail: that is, those “days of yore” in which “the values and the discourses, the habits and the daily space of the *ancien régime* were systematically dismantled . . . so that in their place could be set . . . the systems of a capitalist market economy” (Jameson, *Political* 148, 96). But Alice also figures in the end as the very embodiment of the unresolvable non-synchronous historical contradiction itself. A pregnant anachronism, she contains within herself both the “unfinished past” and “the new society with which the old one is pregnant,” the “growing child of the Future” (Bloch 113, 110). Thus, the labour that begins at the end of Alice’s narrative — the birth that now *literally* begins “to tear the countess of soissons . . . through all the nooks and crannies of her fiery flesh” (136) — promises to deliver the last “declining remnant” of an “unrefurbished past” at the same time that these labour pains signal the onset of new forces of production. As

an allegory of non-synchronous historical structure and process, this is an imminent birth ultimately less representative of any one particular “punctual event” in time (as Boivin has read it) than a reminder of a permanent “constitutive” pattern of transition “throughout the whole of history, as it were” (Bloch 109).<sup>8</sup>

In this case, the forces of production unleashed at the end of Soucy’s novel point either way to an “issue” or progeny predicated on relations of repression, exploitation, and violence. Looking backward, they promise to deliver the offspring of an incestuous, “rotten” past; looking forward, they anticipate the destructive “corruption” of commodity capitalism in which Alice is already implicated by her papa’s “big business.” If, as Bloch posits, “[t]he foundation of the nonsynchronous contradiction is the unfulfilled fairy tale” (112), unmet romantic nostalgia, then Alice’s story ultimately testifies to such an “unfulfilled fairy tale,” despite the persistence of her utopian fantasies for life with her child (136). The “handsome prince” of her favorite courtly romance story is dead; her manor is in flames, as good as trapping her in a burning “tower”; the village “hordes” of the new Now have arrived. There is a blistering irony in her final vow not to become, “now,” “a martyr to hope” — “which,” she adds at last, “can happen in the best of families” (138).

### **The Missing History of the Text and Questions of Literary “Estate”**

From the moment that Alice first introduces herself as “the secretarius” (3), Soucy repeatedly draws our attention to the issue of textual production; scenes of writing intersperse her memoir. It is only at the end of the novel, however, after Ariane’s existence as the Fair Punishment has been uncovered, and the villagers are converging on the manor estate, that Alice casually mentions a few things about her “method of scribbling”:

[I]f any sly devil should stumble upon this book of spells he wouldn’t understand a thing, because I write with just one letter, a cursive *l* it’s called, I string them together page after page, caravel after caravel, nonstop. For I’ve finally done the same thing as my brother, what else is there, I’ve adopted his method of scribbling, the writing goes faster that way and it’s the real reason I can’t reread myself. But still, by lining up these cursive *l*’s I can hear all the words inside my bonnet, and that’s enough. It’s no worse than talking to yourself. Besides, what difference does it make? (134)

Alice has thus been “talking to [her]self” and — at least by the end (“finally”) — scrawling “just one letter.” A sudden metafictional swerve, the text’s “linguistic moment” (Miller 41), this sudden revelation of the “theoretical impossibility” (Choplin 179) of the text “which [we] are reading now” (9), is exacerbated by the fact that the library and the portrait gallery are already “burning fiercely” (131) as Alice makes this disclosure, the manor apparently set aflame by her brother. Furthermore, as “everything draws to a close,” it is *also* her (repeatedly) stated intention to make a “grand sacrifice” (125) of the pages that she has been scribbling “nonstop” (134): “And so I shall immolate this book of spells, just as papa used to sacrifice the billy goat for the renewal of spring” (134). The logical double bind finally presented to us, then, is that we are in the grip of a story that has not only been (at least partially) composed of unintelligible “cursive” loops but also seems to be destined as fuel for the fire: truly, a “gospel of my hell” (135), an incendiary diary, a “last will and testament” (9) immolated in what seems likely to be the funeral pyre of its own author.

If the pocket watch that we set out with had had any hands, we might tell that all of this is calculated to arrive at the eleventh hour as a disenchanting jolt. Hocus pocus! The first-person “book of spells” that has so directly hooked us as participants in the drama of a deeply traumatized subjectivity announces itself as a reconstituted fiction at the very moment of its climax. The horrible “spell” of the first-person structure of address is shattered, and let that be a lesson in “the art of burning one’s fingers” in the blasted hell fires of fiction.<sup>9</sup> The chagrin of readers “burnt” by their own investments in the illusion of memoir’s unmediated authenticity is palpable: as Choplin puts it, “with the realization that what we’re reading is a written document that should be incomprehensible, we shift from what we think is an experience of Alice’s interiority to what is ultimately an experience of *only text*” (179; emphasis added). “We” might thus feel betrayed. The text has caught us in a “reader trap,” even though, once again, it has given us Fair Warning of its fictional self-reflexivity all along.<sup>10</sup>

But the metafictional bombshell that finally shocks the reader into the realm of “only text” also signals at the same time, of course, “a kind of metasynchronicity, if you will,” another temporality with its “own dynamic or time scheme” at work, to recall Jameson (*Political* 97). As such, it is a moment of narrative self-reflexivity that logically extends

the concept of non-synchronous simultaneity even as it presents readers with a token of the text's "theoretical impossibility" on a formal level. And, in raising a whole series of questions about the mode of the text's own coming into being, it is crucial that the climax of Soucy's novel foregrounds, above all, questions of textual history that underscore a glaringly absent structural cause: by what means, agency, or productive force has Alice's "book of spells" been located and transposed into the text "which [we] are reading now" (9)? Insofar as it presupposes the missing past of an effaced editorial hand, Soucy's novel points to the "formal effect of what Althusser, following Spinoza, calls an 'absent cause': the notion of history as a structure predicated on "an absent cause [that] is nowhere empirically present as an element" (Jameson, *Political* 102, 36). Just as the "nowhere empirically present" textual history of Alice's memoir can be apprehended only *as* an "effect," *as* the narrative "which [we] are reading now," so too in Althusser's conception can the absent cause of history "be apprehended only through its effects, and never directly as some reified force" (102). The "notion of History or the Real as an 'absent-cause'" posits the past as a "totality" never "available for representation, any more than it is accessible in the form of some ultimate truth" (55).

If the production history of the text is specifically marked as an unknowable occlusion, then, that is the point: such foreclosure is the condition foundational to our knowledge of *any* past. History as an absent cause *is* the unrepresentable, a site of "impossibility" as such. "Conceived in this sense, History," as Jameson also famously put it, "is what hurts, it is what refuses desire" (*Political* 102). Hence the text's ultimate resistance to the reader's desire, its pre-emptive cancellation of her empathetic identification with its protagonist, by "suddenly barring us from" an "experience of Alice's interiority" (Choplin 179). Only at a basic thematic level a trauma narrative about subjective or privatized histories of pain — a family hurt *traced back to a cause* embodied in Ariane, the Fair Punishment — *La petite fille/The Little Girl* reaches much further as a formal demonstration and philosophical lesson, too, on how it is that history hurts.

But the question with which Alice ends her description of her "method of scribbling" — "Besides, what difference does it make?" — warrants further pressing. The leap in the text's fictional premise from a series of "cursive *ℓ*'s" that traces an inner monologue to the order of the

reconstituted story “which [we] are reading now” does indeed make a “difference” (9). This is specifically so when one considers that the labour implied by this story’s reproduction — precisely that process which the text remains silent on — exceeds curatorial transmission and editorial transcription to imply work that is also *translational* in nature, entailing, in fact, no less than a certain fantastic capacity for decipherment and *übersetzung*.<sup>11</sup> On the one hand, this means that it is more precise to say that the actual “theoretical impossibility” of Soucy’s text lies in its apparent translatability from the inaccessible realm of the absent cause (or the Real) into a symbolic order in the first place. As Walter Benjamin reminds us, “[t]he question of whether a work is translatable” includes “whether by its very essence it allows itself to be translated and thus . . . calls for it” (76). Neither as an “imperfectly intelligible” scrawl (13) nor, theoretically, as a figure of history’s absent cause does Alice’s “book of spells” thus call for translation. Yet, *in effect*, that is very much how her memoir asks to be read: as a “life” already *in translation* from the start, even when the text is read in its original French. Rather than presenting us with a coherent copy of first-hand experience, the text offers us the prospect of a memoir written (at least partly) in a sort of proto-language of “just one letter,” a cartoon of cryptic script presumably processed through the scrim of some transcendently talented “sly devil” of a translator/cryptographer who has cracked the code of Alice’s radically abridged “one letter” mode of composition like some Rosetta Stone. To the degree that translation involves “a ‘spelling out’ of forms of knowledge” (McLuhan 56), we might even say that the text posits some unknown other who “*must have* . . . somewhere, sometime, you see” (9), “stumb[le]d upon this book of spells” to *spell out* all those “strings” of “cursive ls” for us (134).

Intrinsic to the very premise of *La petite fille* are thus issues that usually cluster around reading a text in translation — which might be to say a great deal or not much at all, given that even translation experts acknowledge “there is no consensus about what translation is” (Venuti, “Translation, Intertextuality”). Does it include, for example, that form of intralingual translation also invoked throughout the narrative via Alice’s own struggles as a subject self-consciously estranged in language? Certainly, constant reference to her “dictionaries” (73) as Alice strives to “find the words” (37) that she needs for the “actual name[s]” of things (73), to locate “exactly the correct term, if such a thing exists” (107), and



her compulsive editorial corrections and anxieties about “the meanings of words” and proper usage (“if I dare put it this way”) enact a labour in language that approximates “The Translator’s Task.” In other words, as Alice struggles to translate her experience into language, she herself illustrates the first in a series of “language transfer” (Cronin 474) activities to follow: namely, those of the missing hand behind the preparation of her cryptic “book of spells” and ultimately those of Fischman in her actual translation of *La petite fille* into *The Little Girl*.<sup>12</sup>

It is important that the act of fantastic decoding that “spells out” Alice’s manuscript of “memories, *if that’s what they are*” (94; emphasis added), proposes a conception of translation that exceeds any relationship of equivalence between two different orders of signification (“if such a thing exists”), pointing instead to what Lawrence Venuti terms a “hermeneutic model of translation”: namely, the idea that translation is always “an act of inscription that communicates one interpretation — or set of interpretations — of the source text” (“Translation, Intertextuality”). In this sense, if *La petite fille* already complicates the notion of the text as “faithfully transcribed” by Alice *and* by her manuscript’s invisible translator (21), then this goes doubly so for readers of Fischman’s *The Little Girl*, who are additionally confronted with a text transmuted by the interpretive hand of an *actual* translator.<sup>13</sup> To read *The Little Girl* in translation thus amplifies an awareness of the mediating power and “iterability of language” in Derrida’s sense, underscoring the need for a critically self-aware “hermeneutic” model of reading in translation and in effect warning us against placing “boundless trust” in the “fidelity” of any translator (Johnson 142).<sup>14</sup>

“Translation is writing; that is, it is not translation only in the sense of transcription,” as Derrida observed. “It is a productive writing called forth by the original text.”<sup>15</sup> To the degree that translation produces a text that is *more or less* “relatively autonomous from the source text” (Venuti, “Translation, Intertextuality”), its status as a creative act of interpretation, as a productive “mode” in its own right (Benjamin 75), thus extends fundamental questions about authority, ownership, and control of meaning.<sup>16</sup> As Lori Chamberlain has argued, “the transformation of translation” in recent critical theory “from a reproductive activity into a productive one, from a secondary work into an original work, indicates the coding of translation rights as property rights — signs of riches, signs of power.” It is in part through “the metaphors of transla-

tion” that “the struggle for authorial rights takes place” (261). In fact, according to Chamberlain, “the reason translation is so over-coded, so over-regulated,” in copyright law as in literary history, is precisely because “it *threatens to erase the difference between production and reproduction* which is essential to the establishment of power. Translation can [for instance] masquerade as original, thereby short-circuiting the system” of author-based literary capital altogether (262-63; emphasis added). With its intrinsically subversive potential to burn down the Author’s house, translation remains a suspect and therefore marginalized mode of cultural production, a point that Fischman, for one, has also commented upon.<sup>17</sup>

By embedding the ambiguous mode of translation as the very premise of its own fiction, Soucy’s text, and Fischman’s rendition of it, point beyond the “veritable goldmine” of Alice’s literal manorial estate to foreground the more intangible and complex commodity of the “literary estate” itself. “Just try explaining . . . what it means to be master of an estate!” Alice exclaims at one point (100). In a narrative as indeterminately produced/reproduced as this “last will and testament,” it is the “property rights” and boundary issues raised by multiple levels of translation that are perhaps most likely to defy such “explaining.”

### Vanishing Points: The Cursive Hand, a Burning “Bookhouse”

The “very pretty” illuminated manuscript that Alice consults at the outset of her narrative is an early marker of *The Little Girl’s* preoccupations with the old “scribal art” of writing (*LG* 4; McLuhan 173). Soucy’s recurrent focus on Alice in the act of textual production — “forging” ahead with her “pencil” as “the sheets of paper . . . pil[e] up” — clearly reinforces her existence within a non-synchronous temporal lag, a “still archaic handicraft enclave” and “holdover” within a modernized world of books, motorcycles, and other forms of mechanical, mass reproduction (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 307). Consonant with the novel’s larger historical vision of “archaic feudal structures” giving way to “irresistible modernizing tendencies” (309), the text’s attention to Alice’s cursive labour also reinscribes the ontological rupture between the pages that Alice produces and the ones that we “are reading now” (9). Itself an integral reminder of the text’s problematization of history as an unrepresentable “absent cause,” this shift from a mode of writing to print represents a crucial final extension of its invitation to contemplate our

reliance on various forms of translation, which in this case are inter-medial in nature. In this instance, however, what the translation and displacement of an older mode of textual production by a newer mode ultimately underscore is the very principle of constant repetition driving such transitions over time, as “episodes in a single vast unfinished plot,” a “vaster historical rhythm” (Jameson, *Political* 20, 96).

From our point in time, it might actually bear reminding that writing no less than print *is* a technology, and “technologies *are* ways of translating one kind of knowledge into another mode,” as theorists from Benjamin to McLuhan have established (McLuhan 56).<sup>18</sup> Interestingly, whereas Benjamin, in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” charted the transition to mass culture in terms of the loss of the original’s “aura,” McLuhan’s analysis in his 1964 *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* accentuated, historically speaking, the aura or “magic” of mechanization or, as McLuhan termed it, “the typographic spell” of the reproduction in the new era of print culture:

In amplifying and extending the written word, typography revealed and greatly extended the structure of writing. . . . [T]he identical character of several books . . . is after all the most magical and potent aspect of print and mass production. . . . The printed book based on typographic uniformity and repeatability in the visual order was the first teaching machine, just as typography was the first mechanization of a handicraft. (19, 174)

Mechanical reproduction is obviously unlike translation in that “the message of print and typography is primarily that of repeatability” or “identical” replication (McLuhan 160).<sup>19</sup> That message of identical reproduction might be subliminal by now, but it is no less “potent” for that. This is to suggest that, as much as anything else, it is a “*typographic spell*” that surcharges Alice’s “book of spells” with a “magical and potent aspect.” For the message of identical repeatability inherent to the typographic form itself reinforces precisely that illusion of mimetic fidelity crucial to our investment in her “faithfully transcribe[d]” first-person diary from the start (21). As opposed to what Alice describes as her “minuscule, crowded writing” (102), the neat uniformity of the novel’s typography supplies implicit reassurance of a protagonist who is objectively “recording the facts,” as she asserts, “with probity and simplicity” (85).

Viewed as integral to its textual strategies as well as incidental to its form, the novel's self-conscious distinction between writing and typography also speaks directly to the present in its twin concerns with memory and speed. Print, of course, "provided a vast new memory for past writings that made a personal memory inadequate," just as digital prostheses today provide the most adequate outsourcing for our memories (McLuhan 174). Rehearsed under her bonnet as she talks to herself, Alice's memories prove to be "inadequate" because, as we recall, Alice is not really writing them out *completely*, at least not always. "It's the real reason," as she says, that she "can't re-read" herself, though we, who follow her past writings through the "new memory" afforded by the "magic" of her manuscript's translator and of print, can (134). And the "method of scribbling" that Alice resorts to has everything to do with that tricky missing hand of time. It is the hyperefficient, "bullet"-like speed of her writing method that she constantly stresses ("clear the tracks, it's coming fast" [97]), and that her run-on constructions reinforce, even before "everything draws to a close" (125) and she recognizes that "I have very little time and I won't have had enough to recount everything." In essence, what Alice wants is a technology that can keep up to her thoughts, a "cognitive automaticity, the ability to think as fast as possible, freed as much as can be from the strictures of whichever technology we must use to record our thoughts" (Trubek 37). As writing fails her, she (pragmatically) adopts her brother's shorthand technique: "[W]hat else is there . . . the writing goes faster that way" (134).

Filling her pages "without stopping . . . at a speed that can break necks" (97), Alice's compositional method prioritizes precisely the same characteristic of the "speed up and exchange of information," the increasing rapidity, that McLuhan stressed in his wide-angled historical analysis of new media. In superseding writing as a cultural dominant, not only did mechanized print technology usher in "a speed of information movement unknown before printing," but speed also constituted the key element of what McLuhan foresaw back in the 1960s as the "postliterate," "electronic" culture that lay ahead (177, 24). Importantly, as Gregory Betts has recently observed,

McLuhan coined the term "postliterate" to represent an era not when humanity has given up reading [or writing] but when the traditional function of reading and literature has been so tremen-

dously altered by the acceleration of production and distribution of information that the entire nature of the activity has changed. . . . The postliterate era . . . introduces a profound increase in the speed of information gathering. (260)

Likewise “tremendously altered by the acceleration” of its own break-neck speed of production, Alice’s manuscript ironically also ends up challenging readers’ conceptions of “the entire nature of the activity” of writing. Reconstituted in print by another, absent hand, it then raises further questions about the status or “traditional function of reading and literature,” as we have seen. In this sense, despite the fundamental anachronism of its originally “scribal” mode, and the complex blend of its self-consciously *preliterate* and highly *literate* aristocratic voice, Alice’s diary is also apt to resonate uniquely within the context of a *postliterate* culture.<sup>20</sup>

Driven by the same imperative for speed, efficiency, and automation, the “postliterate” paradigm transforming textual practices today has affected foremost perhaps the old “art” of handwriting itself. The cursive hand that produced the manuscript, whether centuries old and “illuminated” or a string of “cursive *l*’s,” provides perhaps the oldest surviving example of a premodern technology in our own society’s “overlay and structural coexistence of *several* modes of production.” The possible death of handwriting, like the gradual corruption of books by “mildew and damp” in Alice’s library, will likely unfold as “a long and slow” demise (73). Still, in the interactive, “postliterate” now, the time for cursive script, like Alice’s time, seems to “draw to a close” (125), a handiwork increasingly supplanted by the more instantaneous productivities of the postmodern and the posthuman. The culture of nostalgia infusing current debates over the fate of handwriting is one sure sign of its decline.<sup>21</sup>

If the end of Alice’s cursive hand in some sense “spells out” the end of handwriting, and if Soucy’s text thus literally embodies the “cultural dominant” of a print technology “on the point of . . . blotting out” the older art (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 307), then there might be an intimation reaching yet further in the spectacular omen of the burning “bookhouse” at the narrative’s conclusion, an implicit recognition of the ultimate impermanence of that “dominant” print culture and technology itself. At least, the “grand sacrifice” of the printed word envisioned by the novel’s closing conflagration (125), the incineration of books

along with Alice's handwritten pages, suggests something of that larger pattern of the passage of modes of production as a "perpetual . . . constitutive structure" of history (Jameson, *Political* 97). As the "monumental library" of her "earthly abode" (82) goes up "smoking and flaming" (131), in the end, Alice muses that she will "fetch tomorrow . . . what's left of the charred library" (136): "[S]ome [books,] I dare believe, will have been spared — you wouldn't think so but dictionaries are tough, they have the calm obstinacy of the wood from which they're born, trees could give us no gifts more beautiful" (136). At the same time, it is clear that "with such a fire" the villagers "might as well have tried to put it out with spit, that wouldn't have changed a hell of a lot, if you want my opinion" (131).

The question of what will remain, including Alice's own fate, ultimately remains unresolved. Maybe our heroine, along with a few "tough" books, will survive this closing inferno. In another sense, they have both already been reduced to "dolls of ash," as signifiers on the page of a self-conscious fiction (133). Moreover, we already know that even the most "obstinate" books in this library are destined to succumb to a "slow and inexorable work of invasion . . . [that] is exerting its powers on our estate." "[T]he dictionaries are dying a natural death like all the rest — corruption! do your duty" (73). Although "a natural death" is thus just a matter of time, Alice's narrative nevertheless ends at a critical moment of imminent birth and/or death, a moment of pure potentiality that points to the inevitability of another day but does not "spell out" that future, either.

In 1864, Mallarmé famously wrote that "the world exists to end in a book," to which McLuhan, in 1964, added the following postscript: "We are now in a position to go beyond that and to transfer the whole show to the memory of a computer" (59). A more recent historian of translation and information technology, Michael Cronin, speaks of the coming "Translation Age" as an age of "Everyware," an "information-immersive environment" of "ubiquitous computing" akin in its effects to the introduction of electricity (475). Written and translated at the turn of the twenty-first century, *The Little Girl Who Was Too Fond of Matches* looks back to the past of a private family "hell" struck up by the original, accidental cause of Ariane's match to excavate a "fantastic historiography" also significant for "tomorrow" in its implications. Within a narrative time frame of two days, beginning with an act of suicide and

ending with an act of libricide, Soucy conjures a universe that hints at the end of Mallarmé's world of books, too, even as it also refuses to "go beyond that and . . . transfer the whole show," in McLuhan's words, to any definite "tomorrow," digital or otherwise. How long the present, or the residue of any incomplete past, might persist as a leftover in the future is uncertain. What seems more certain is that Soucy's parable is one of change that causes pain. Whether destructive or productive, the universe of pain is almost always instructive and reverberates across languages. Pain is perhaps the only invariable effect of history's absent hand — that invisible but not otherworldly hand that we know *must* be there, "somewhere . . . you see," if only by the brief flare of a match (11).

### AUTHOR'S NOTE

This essay was originally presented as a keynote address for the 2014 Spring Research Seminar, Canadian Literature in the Throes of the Twenty-First Century, of the University of Alberta's Canadian Literature Centre/Centre de littérature canadienne. Thanks to Dr. Marie Carrière, director of the CLC, and to seminar participants for the invitation and opportunity to develop this work.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Soucy's dramatic sequel to the novel, *Catoblépas* (Boréal, 2001), remains untranslated.

<sup>2</sup> Critics who have taken up the novel's "innovative lexicon" include Gervais, Marcheix, and Whelan. Whelan offers a linguistic analysis of the device of comparison in the novel.

<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the novel remained at the top of French-language bestseller lists for the better part of a year and attracted considerable notoriety upon publication. As Soucy's most acclaimed work, it was shortlisted for France's prestigious Prix Renaudot, among other prizes. On the "sensation" caused by its publication, see Howells and Kröller; and Woods. In the wake of Soucy's sudden death in 2013, Dany Laferrière hailed the Giller Prize nominee as "one of Quebec's great literary stylists" (qtd. in Woods).

<sup>4</sup> Snauwaert makes important connections between *La petite fille qui aimait trop les allumettes* and Jean François Beauchemin's *Le jour des corneilles* (2004) and points (as does Boivin) to the relevance of Réjean Ducharme's classic precursor text, *Lavalée des avalés* (1966). Her exploration of such "family resemblances" includes the trope of family romance in the novel. Paterson provides a feminist analysis of gender identity in the text. English criticism of Soucy's text is so far limited to Choplin's and Whelan's articles.

<sup>5</sup> Jameson's concept of "worldness" is useful insofar as subjective perception and objective material detail converge in Alice's narrative; see his discussion of "Magical Narratives" in *The Political Unconscious*. "In contrast to realism," he argues, "the inner-worldly objects" of the romance setting such as "landscape or village, forest or mansion . . . are somehow transformed into folds in space, into discontinuous pockets of homogen[e]ous time and

heightened symbolic closure, such that they become tangible analoga or perceptual vehicles for *world* in its larger phenomenological sense" (112).

<sup>6</sup> Prior to her gallery tour, the sound of Alice's surname, "soissons," prompts only the vague "impression that the word had something to do with me, that it belonged to the most intimate part of me" (47). It is of course not incidental that Soucy's "soissons de coëtherlants" play out the overdetermined plot of a moribund, waning aristocracy via the familiar trope of the portrait gallery, which once again pointedly situates Alice's family in a broader cultural genealogy of decadent aristocracy or "slutty" nobility spanning the French Regency and English Restoration periods to the nineteenth-century *fin de siècle* and beyond (as the examples of Poe, Wilde, or Restoration dramatists such as Richard Sheridan might remind us).

<sup>7</sup> Russell West-Pavlov notes the idea of "incommensurable timeframes juxtaposed upon one another" as a particular "manifestation" of postmodern theory generally (150), but Jameson is responsible for recuperating the concept via Bloch (*Political 97*; *Postmodernism* 307). Originally published in 1932 and reprinted in his *Erbschaft dieser Zeit* (1935), Bloch's work on "Nonsynchronism and the Obligation to Its Dialectics" was translated into English by Mark Ritter in the *New German Critique* in the late 1970s; a more recent translation of *Erbschaft dieser Zeit*, *Heritage of Our Times*, by Neville Plaice and Stephen Plaice, renders the chapter on non-synchronism as "Summary Transition: Non-Contemporaneity and Obligation to Its Dialectic" (97-148). My references are to the latter unless otherwise noted.

<sup>8</sup> See Boivin. I am following both Bloch and Jameson in stressing, on the other hand, the "constitutive" features of historical processes. As Jameson puts it, "Just as overt revolution is *no punctual event* . . . but brings to the surface . . . struggles . . . at work in the whole course of social life that precedes it . . . so also the overtly 'transitional' moments of cultural revolution are themselves but the passage to the surface of a *permanent* process in human societies, of a *permanent* struggle between the various coexisting modes of production. The triumphant moment in which a new systemic dominant gains ascendancy is therefore only the diachronic manifestation of a *constant* struggle for the perpetuation and reproduction of its dominance" (*Political 97*; emphasis added). Like Bloch, Jameson emphasizes a form of "perpetual cultural revolution" that is a "deeper and more permanent constitutive structure" of history than discrete "events" in history (97).

<sup>9</sup> I echo Gervais, in "L'art de se brûler les doigts," who argues that the "irreducible illegibility" of Alice's scribbles represents the reader's own projection and perpetuation of Alice's "misunderstandings": "Notre lecture ne vient pas dissiper la méprise, elle en génère un nouvelle, à notre insu évidemment; tel est pris qui croyait prendre" (393). Assistance from unpublished translation by Adrien Guyot (9).

<sup>10</sup> On Henry James's conceit of the "reader trap" and an analysis of "the reading effect" as a performative "repetition of the scene dramatized in the text," see Felman's discussion of *The Turn of the Screw* in *Writing and Madness* (141-247).

<sup>11</sup> What initially appears as the "impossibility" of textual form emerges in this theoretical context as a distinctive example of Jameson's "postmodern 'fantastic historiography.'" In his formulation, "fantastic historiography" takes two forms, one of which "mimes" reality in a "new free play with the past," the other of which is "purely" inventive in its "collage effects" (*Postmodernism* 368, 369). Soucy's text reflects elements of both strains as outlined by Jameson, particularly the latter, in addition to the "fantastic" element of translating the past's untranslatable trace.

<sup>12</sup> As I have intimated, the various levels of translation at play might be thought of in relation to Jakobson's categories of the intralingual (Alice as translator); the intersemiotic (the absent hand that translates her "loops"); and the interlingual (the literary translator of Soucy's source text). See Derrida (173).



<sup>13</sup> See Venuti's recent works for his distinction between the "hermeneutic model" of translation and the "instrumental model." His theory and practice are notably influenced by Derrida's revisionist work on translation.

<sup>14</sup> Notably, Derrida's theory of translation's reproduction and irreducible difference — also figures in Soucy's text through the visual trope of twins and doubling, an "interdependent" relationship mirroring that between source texts and their translated "twins." Before the fire that alters Ariane beyond recognition, Alice and her twin are "cherub[s]," "as much alike as two bubbles," but even then, Alice notes, "she wasn't me" (94). Her fantasy of a literally transparent ("bubble") mode of replication is ultimately revealed when she seeks to "double" Ariane "with the child that will emerge . . . from my body": "[T]his cherub will be like a bubble to me, . . . and I'll call her Ariane in memory of the Punishment" (136-37).

<sup>15</sup> *The Ear of the Other* (153; qtd. in Chamberlain 265). See also Derrida for an influential analysis of the "both necessary and impossible" endeavour of translation (174).

<sup>16</sup> For translation theorists such as Venuti, who uphold "foreignization" on ethical and anti-imperialist grounds, the emphasis here would fall on the "more" of "more or less." In Christopher Rollason's words, "for Venuti, a translation should not read as if it were an original" but should (like Ariane after the fire) "bear the visible signs of its translatedness."

<sup>17</sup> Traditionally, from the more "instrumentalist" pole, literary translation has been undervalued as merely derivative of the original, a matter of mere reproduction. In her excellent discussion of the gendered "metaphors of translation," Chamberlain critiques the influential Benjaminian trope of the echo (in "The Translator's Task") as reinforcing conceptions of translation's subordinate status (255). Fischman comments that "Literary translation does not always enjoy a comfortable seat at the literary table. This is due partly to ignorance of just what it is that we do and how we do it, [and] partly to a misguided notion that being obliged to read a work in translation betrays a reader's ignorance, so that translation is perceived as something shameful, an activity to be hidden or camouflaged. How many times have you heard someone say apologetically that she has 'only' read a book in translation?"

<sup>18</sup> "[A]ll media are active metaphors in their power to translate experience into new forms" (McLuhan 57). In terms of Benjamin's work, see not only "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936), but also "The Author as Producer" (1934), in which Benjamin argues for a reconceptualization of literary genres in view of the technical factors affecting modernity: that is, an awareness of how new media such as cinema will translate and transform old forms.

<sup>19</sup> At the same time, as Michael Cronin has demonstrated, the historical relationship between translation and print technology is deeply intertwined (474). On the "message" of handwriting, conversely, as a sign of presence, intimacy, and originality, and as imbued with an expressivist ethos of individualism, see Trubek (34-36).

<sup>20</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, McLuhan's categories of the preliterate, literate, and post-literate society map onto what Bloch would have recognized as the coexistence of non-synchronous realities: "Electric speed mingles the cultures of prehistory with the dregs of industrial marketeers, the nonliterate with the semiliterate and the postliterate" (16).

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Florey, who calls for a revival of the "arts" of penmanship and cursive script in schools. Noting the thousand years that it took for Sumerian writing to "disappear completely," Trubek, in contrast, concludes that "Handwriting is not going anywhere soon. But it is going" (41).

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