

**“Notre voisine méconnue”
Margaret Laurence in Quebec
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Violette Drouin

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“Notre voisine méconnue”: Margaret Laurence in Quebec

VIOLETTE DROUIN
McGill University

Abstract

Though Margaret Laurence’s *Manawaka Cycle* was met with success upon its publication in English, it is no obvious feat to translate such success across the borders of language, even within her own home country. This article attempts to chart the complex history of the translation of the *Manawaka Cycle* into French and its reception in Quebec. Drawing on reviews, advertisements, letters, and the books themselves, it establishes two periods of translation, the first in the 1970s and 1980s, the second in the early 2000s. It traces the challenges faced by publishers of these translations, and how they adapted to the changing literary and political climate of the second half of the 20th century. It also touches on the complex relationship between French and French Canadian publishers. The article examines how Laurence’s work was received in Quebec and the space of translation in the collective literary memory. Finally, it compares translations and retranslations of two of Laurence’s novels to garner insight into the differences between the two periods of translation.

Résumé

Bien que le *cycle de Manawaka* de l’écrivaine canadienne Margaret Laurence a connu un grand succès lors de sa publication en anglais, la traduction d’une telle réussite au-delà des frontières de la langue constitue un

véritable défi, même dans le pays d’origine de l’auteur. Cet article tente de retracer l’histoire complexe de la traduction du *cycle de Manawaka* vers le français et sa réception au Québec. À partir de critiques, de publicités, de lettres et des livres eux-mêmes, il vise à établir deux périodes de traduction : une première période dans les années 1970 et 1980, et une deuxième période au début des années 2000. Par ailleurs, ce texte explique les difficultés auxquelles les éditeurs des traductions ont été confrontés, ainsi que l’adaptation de ces derniers aux climats littéraires et politiques changeants au cours de la seconde moitié du vingtième siècle. Il porte également sur les relations complexes entre les éditeurs français et canadiens-français, de même que la réception des œuvres de Laurence au Québec et dans les espaces de traduction dans la mémoire collective littéraire. Finalement, l’article présente une comparaison des traductions et retraductions de deux romans de Laurence afin d’offrir un aperçu des différences entre les deux périodes de traduction.

Introduction

I do hope you will have in Quebec the readers you so rightly deserve. If they only come to you, then I know they will take to you.

(Gabrielle Roy, in a 1980 letter to Margaret Laurence¹)

When Margaret Laurence’s Canadian publisher, Jack McClelland of McClelland & Stewart, first read the manuscript of her 1964 novel *The Stone Angel*, he wasn’t certain it would be met with great success upon publication. In a 1963 letter to Laurence, he cautiously stated that “[o]bviously, it has some built-in advantages for a Canadian market but, by and large, it is within our experience the type of novel that Canadians don’t turn cartwheels about.”² Laurence, born in 1926 in Neepawa,

¹. Margaret Laurence and Gabrielle Roy, *Intimate Strangers: The Letters of Margaret Laurence and Gabrielle Roy*, ed. Paul G. Socken (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2014), 83.

². Margaret Laurence and Jack McClelland, *Margaret Laurence & Jack McClelland: Letters*, eds. Laura K. Davis and Linda M. Morra (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2018), 86.

Manitoba, was at the time living with her two children in England after having separated from her husband Jack, a civil engineer with the British Colonial Service. The Laurences had lived in Africa for several years—first in Somalia and then in Ghana—where Jack was employed. Margaret’s first books were inspired by her experiences there, as she came to disagree with imperialist attitudes and policy.³ *The Stone Angel* was her first book set in Canada, and though it was published simultaneously in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom, she voiced particular concern over its reception in Canada in a letter to Jack McClelland: “your opinion of my writing has some special significance for me, perhaps because one is always, if unconsciously, writing for one’s own people, and what they think matters terribly.”⁴

By the time the French translation of *The Stone Angel* began to appear in Quebec, the situation could not have been more different: Laurence was now “*l’auteur le plus lu au Canada*.”⁵ In the early 2000s, when the entire *Manawaka Cycle*—of which *The Stone Angel* is the first volume—was republished in French by Éditions Alto and Éditions Nota bene, Laurence was, in contrast, spoken of as “[n]otre voisine méconnue.”⁶ The story of Margaret Laurence in Quebec is not a straightforward one. Translations of her works appear out of order and years later than one might expect; incorrect information is printed in newspaper reviews and even in the books themselves, and Laurence’s wishes are not always respected. And yet, her novels were translated and published, and Francophone readers in Quebec were able to experience the joy of connecting with books one reviewer called “*extrêmement puissant[s] et pourtant touchant[s]*.”⁷ In this article, I will attempt to trace the history of the French translations of the *Manawaka Cycle*—*The Stone Angel*, *A Jest of God*, *The Fire-Dwellers*, *A Bird in the House*, and *The Diviners*—and their reception in Quebec. Where

³. James King, *The Life of Margaret Laurence* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 1997).

⁴. Laurence and McClelland, *Margaret Laurence & Jack McClelland*, 76.

⁵. “Les livres canadiens de langue française,” *Le Soleil* (Québec, QC), October 16, 1976.

⁶. David Homel, “Notre voisine méconnue,” *La Presse* (Montréal, QC), March 3, 2012.

⁷. Jean Basile, “Un roman de Pierre Séguin, une traduction de Claire Martin.” *Le Devoir* (Montréal, QC), August 28, 1976, 13.

possible, I will also connect this history to its broader literary-historical context. I have divided the translations into what I am calling the first period of translation, taking place in the 1970s and 1980s, and the second period of translation, taking place in the early 2000s.

The first period of translation: 1971–1989

Margaret Laurence’s work first became accessible to French-Canadian audiences with the release of Paul Newman’s 1968 film *Rachel, Rachel*, which is based on her third novel, *A Jest of God* (1966). The film was presumably either dubbed or subtitled in French, and was playing in Quebec at least as early as 1970.⁸ *Rachel, Rachel* clearly reached a wide enough audience to enter the public consciousness; when the first translation of one of Laurence’s novels was published, it was advertised under the heading “*Par l’auteur du film Rachel, Rachel.*”⁹ This first translation was, oddly, of the third volume of the *Manawaka Cycle*, *The Fire-Dwellers* (1969). The French version, *Ta maison est en feu*, translated by Rosine Fitzgerald, was published in 1971 by a French house, Éditions Stock, and distributed in Quebec by HMH. According to advertisements, it retailed for \$3.25, the equivalent of \$24.95 in 2023.¹⁰ In a 1976 letter to fellow Manitoban author Gabrielle Roy, Laurence expressed her disappointment that Stock did not select a translator from Canada: “At the time when they had just taken the book, Naim [*sic*] Kattan was in Paris, and tried to persuade them to get a French Canadian translator, but they wouldn’t.”¹¹ This short passage highlights the lack of agency Laurence had when it came to the translation of her novels. It also demonstrates the value she placed on the Canadian literary industry, as she took it upon herself to ask a Quebec author, Naïm Kattan, to intervene on her behalf in favour of a

⁸. “Rachel, Rachel,” *La Presse* (Montréal, QC), May 2, 1970.

⁹. “Ta maison est en feu,” *Le Devoir* (Montréal, QC), June 26, 1971.

¹⁰. “Inflation Calculator,” Bank of Canada, accessed April 7, 2023, <https://www.bankofcanada.ca/rates/related/inflation-calculator/>.

¹¹. Laurence and Roy, *Intimate Strangers*, 7.

French-Canadian translator. Kattan himself played a crucial role in the world of Canadian publishing, heading the Canada Council for the Arts' Writing and Publication Program for 25 years.¹²

Luckily for Laurence and for French-Canadian translators, the landscape of translation in Canada was about to shift dramatically thanks to the Canada Council:

[I]n 1972, following the Official Languages Act (1969), which enshrined equal constitutional rights for French and English as official languages, and growing appreciation of the importance of French-English exchange in the context of Québec demands for autonomy, the Canada Council created a substantial Translation Grant Program. Aimed primarily at making more translations available, particularly from French into English and from English into French, the Program was successful in increasing translation activity approximately ten-fold, from an average of some 25 titles per decade, in the 1950s and 1960s, to roughly the same number per year in the decades following its implementation.¹³

As is evident from the extremely low number of translations published in the 1960s, French-Canadian publishers likely did not have the budget or capacity to devote significant effort to publishing translations before the Translation Grant Program was implemented. This does not explain why the first of Laurence's books to be translated was *The Fire-Dwellers*, but it does provide an explanation as to why *Ta maison est en feu* was published by a French house, and why the rest of the *Manawaka Cycle* was left untranslated until over a decade after its publication in English.

The Translation Grant Program was also a stroke of luck for Montréal-based publisher Le Cercle du livre de France (CLF). Under the leadership of Pierre Tisseyre, the CLF had carved out a significant place in the market

¹² Norma Baumel Joseph, “Honorary degree citation – Naïm Kattan,” Concordia University, accessed November 2, 2023, <https://www.concordia.ca/offices/archives/honorary-degree-recipients/2006/06/naim-kattan.html>.

¹³ Agnes Whitfield, “Author-Publisher-Translator Communication in English-Canadian Literary Presses since 1960,” in *Authorial and Editorial Voices in Translation 2 – Editorial and Publishing Practices*, eds. Hanne Jansen and Anna Wegener, (Montréal: Éditions québécoises de l'œuvre, 2013), 214.

in the 1940s and 1950s. In 1967, they published a third of all new Quebec novels.¹⁴ However, the 1970s heralded a change in the CLF's fortunes as they became embroiled in the *querelle du joul*. As Karim Larose notes, Quebec was rife with linguistic tension at the end of the 1960s. Francophones, seeing that nominally bilingual schooling was taking place mostly in English, were advocating for stronger laws to protect the French language, while Anglophones pushed back. In 1968, Michel Tremblay's landmark play *Les Belles-sœurs*—written in *joul*, a working-class sociolect of Quebec French that contains some English influences—was staged. Along with other writings in *joul*, the play stirred up significant controversy.¹⁵ The CLF found themselves on the conservative side of this debate: “*Partisan d'un certain conformisme littéraire, Tisseyre rejette l'utilisation du joul en littérature et refuse les manuscrits de jeunes auteurs en pleine ascension ... L'éditeur se trouve alors coupé d'une partie importante de la jeune génération qui va bientôt se tourner vers des maisons plus audacieuses.*”¹⁶ To make up for these losses, the CLF sought to expand their horizons by launching new collections such as the *Collection des deux solitudes*, which was established in 1973 with the mission of publishing French translations of English-Canadian works. According to Jacques Michon, “[g]râce au programme d'aide à la traduction du Conseil des arts du Canada, la collection offre pourtant pour la première fois en traduction française des oeuvres importantes de Mordecai Richler, Robertson Davies et Margaret Laurence. Une trentaine de titres sont lancés en une dizaine d'années.”¹⁷

Indeed, over the lifespan of the *Collection des deux solitudes*, three of Laurence's novels were published in French: *The Stone Angel* (*L'ange de pierre*, 1976, translated by Claire Martin); *The Diviners*, (*Les oracles*, 1979, translated by Michelle Robinson); and *A Jest of God* (*Un Dieu farceur*, 1981, also translated by Michelle Robinson). A rather pointed note found inside

¹⁴. Jacques Michon, *Histoire de l'édition littéraire au Québec au XX^e siècle. Volume 3: La bataille du livre, 1960–2000* (Québec: Fides, 2010).

¹⁵. Karim Larose, *La Langue de papier : Spéculations linguistiques au Québec (1957–1977)* (Montréal: Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 2004), 180.

¹⁶. Michon, *Histoire de l'édition littéraire au Québec au XX^e siècle*, 51.

¹⁷. *Ibid*, 51–52.

these translations remarks that “*Grâce à un programme d’aide à la traduction du Conseil des Arts [sic], il est enfin devenu possible de faire connaître au Québec les oeuvres marquantes d’auteurs canadiens-anglais connues souvent dans tous les pays de langue anglaise, mais ignorées dans les pays de langue française parce qu’elles n’avaient jamais été traduites.*”¹⁸ Laurence likely shared the opinion that it was about time such a program be put in place; in the same 1976 letter to Roy, she declared herself to be “very pleased that these other 2 books [*The Stone Angel* and *The Diviners*] are being done by a French Canadian firm.”¹⁹

The three CLF translations were broadly well-received. *Le Devoir*’s Jean Basile called *L’ange de pierre* “un roman d’une qualité d’émotion rare,” while *La Presse*’s Réginald Martel asserted that “*Margaret Laurence sait créer un univers autonome. Elle sait inventer et raconter une histoire, sans prouesses de construction il est vrai, mais avec des moyens sûrs.*”²⁰ Jocelyne Lepage of *La Presse* called *Les oracles* “*magistralement construit,*”²¹ while Monique Roy wrote in *Courrier Sud* that “[à] quinze ans de sa publication originale, *A jest of God [sic]* de Margaret Laurence n’a rien perdu de sa force ... Elle n’a pas que le don, mais l’art de fouiller l’âme humaine jusque dans ses replis les plus secrets.”²² Most of these reviewers noted their relative ignorance of English Canada; for example, Lepage related that “[j]’ai, par ailleurs, été étonnée de découvrir à quel point les problèmes des Manitobains d’origine autre qu’anglaise ressemblaient aux problèmes que les Québécois ont connus avant la Révolution tranquille.”²³ They also tended to position themselves at the conservative end of the *joual* debate, occasionally criticizing “*les quelques anglicismes*”²⁴ that the translators let slip.

18. Margaret Laurence, *Un dieu farceur*, trans. Michelle Robinson (Montréal: Le Cercle du Livre de France, 1981).

19. Roy and Laurence, *Intimate Strangers*, 7.

20. Réginald Martel, “La vieille dame qui voulait réussir sa mort,” *La Presse* (Montréal, QC), September 11, 1976.

21. Jocelyne Lepage, “Amour du pouvoir et pouvoir de l’amour,” *La Presse* (Montréal, QC), August 2, 1980.

22. Monique Roy, “Margaret Laurence : Il y a quinze ans déjà,” *Courrier Sud* (Nicolet, QC), June 15, 1982, 56.

23. Lepage, “Amour du pouvoir.”

24. Martel, “La vieille dame.”

Though the reviews were positive, it seems that these translations were not read widely; Jacques Michon noted that the *Collection des deux solitudes*, though more successful than some of the CLF's other endeavours at the time, “ne réussit pas à s'attacher un grand public.”²⁵ In this context, it is also noteworthy that the retail price for these books was much higher than that of *Ta maison est en feu: L'ange de pierre* was priced at \$7.95 in 1976²⁶ (\$40.27 in 2023)²⁷, and *Un Dieu farceur* was priced at \$14.95 in 1982²⁸ (\$43.75 in 2023).²⁹ These prices were not unusual for French-Canadian books at the time; in the 1976 advertisement, books of similar lengths to *L'ange de pierre* retailed at similar prices. For example, Louky Bersianik's seminal novel *L'Eugélonne* is listed at \$8.95. Having these novels translated by French-Canadian translators and published by a French-Canadian house had the advantage of strengthening the local literary industry, but the disadvantage of making the books themselves less financially accessible.

The slow decline of the CLF, which began with the *querelle du joul*, was to continue in the following years: “*La maison n'arrive plus à faire ses frais, même avec l'aide financière du Conseil des arts du Canada. Le nombre de titres publiés annuellement diminue constamment au cours des années 1980.*”³⁰ Over the course of the 1980s, the CLF slowly transformed into a publisher of children's books and school textbooks, changing its name to Éditions Pierre Tisseyre in 1988.³¹ Presumably, at some point during this transitional period, the translations of Margaret Laurence's novels went out of print. The late 1980s saw the publication of one more translation: *Un oiseau dans la maison* (*A Bird in the House*, translated by Christine Klein-Lataud), released in 1989 by Les Éditions du Roseau. I was unable to find any reviews of this translation in the Bibliothèque et Archives Nationales du Québec's online collection of digitized newspapers. It had taken three publishers, two countries, an all-new translation grant program, and twenty-five years

²⁵. Michon, *Histoire de l'édition littéraire au Québec*, 52.

²⁶. “Les livres canadiens.”

²⁷. “Inflation Calculator.”

²⁸. Roy, “Margaret Laurence.”

²⁹. “Inflation Calculator.”

³⁰. Michon, *Histoire de l'édition littéraire au Québec*, 52.

³¹. *Ibid*, 52.

since the first publication of *The Stone Angel*, but the entire *Manawaka Cycle* was at last translated into French, marking the end of the first period of translation.

The second period of translation: 2006–2012

The second period of translation took place between 2006 and 2012, and saw all five volumes of the *Manawaka Cycle* released in both France and Quebec. Though there is significant temporal overlap between the French and Quebecois publications, for the sake of clarity, I will begin with France. Éditions Joëlle Losfeld, a Paris-based subsidiary of Gallimard,³² published the *Manawaka Cycle* in the following order: *Une divine plaisanterie* (*A Jest of God*, 2006, translated by Edith Soonckindt), *L'ange de pierre* (*The Stone Angel*, 2007, translated by Sophie Bastide-Foltz), *Les habitants du feu* (*The Fire-Dwellers*, 2009, translated by Florence Lévy-Paoloni), *Les devins* (*The Diviners*, 2010, translated by Sophie Bastide-Foltz), and *Un oiseau dans la maison* (*A Bird in the House*, 2012, translated by Christine Klein-Lataud). All but *A Bird in the House* were retranslated, and all of the new translators were French.^{33,34,35} I was unable to access copies of these editions of *Les devins*, *L'ange de pierre*, or *Un oiseau dans la maison*, but notes inside *Une divine plaisanterie* and *Les habitants du feu* indicate that these two novels, at least, were translated thanks to funding from the Centre national du livre (CNL), the French government agency dedicated to supporting the book industry.³⁶ According to the CNL's website, they

³². “Joëlle Losfeld,” Gallimard, accessed June 22, 2023, <https://www.gallimard.fr/Catalogue/GALLIMARD/Joelle-Losfeld#>.

³³. “Sophie Bastide-Foltz.” Éditions Alto, accessed April 8, 2023, <https://editionsalto.com/collaborateur/sophie-bastide-foltz/>.

³⁴. “Florence Lévy-Paoloni.” Babelio, accessed April 8, 2023, <https://www.babelio.com/auteur/Florence-Levy-Paolini/102616>.

³⁵. “Professionnellement vôtre.” Edith Soonckindt, accessed April 8, 2023, <https://www.soonckindt.com/bio-bibliographie-sommaire/>.

³⁶. “Le CNL en bref.” Centre national du livre, accessed Apr. 8, 2023, <https://centrenationaldulivre.fr/le-cn1-en-bref>.

offer translation grants which have “*pour objet de proposer au public français des oeuvres du monde entier, représentatives de la diversité littéraire et scientifique, dans une traduction de qualité.*”³⁷

Like Éditions Stock in the 1970s, Éditions Joëlle Losfeld chose to publish the *Manawaka Cycle* out of order, beginning this time with *A Jest of God*. As in the case with Stock’s *Ta maison est en feu*, it is unclear why Joëlle Losfeld started with this particular novel; the film *Rachel, Rachel* is mentioned on the back cover, but it seems unlikely that a 1960s film would hold significant sway over publication decisions made forty years later on the other side of the Atlantic. This back cover also asserts, erroneously and rather cryptically, that “[e]n 1957, [Margaret Laurence] écrit le ‘cycle de Manawaka.’”³⁸ On the back cover of *Les habitants du feu*, this is corrected to “[e]n 1957, date de son retour d’Afrique où elle a vécu quelques années, elle débute le ‘cycle de Manawaka.’”³⁹ Despite the correction, this error may indicate a certain hastiness or lack of care on the publisher’s part.

Une divine plaisanterie and *Les habitants du feu* are physically large books compared to standard English-language trade paperbacks. They are also expensive, even by today’s standards, with the back covers displaying prices of €22.50 and €25.00, respectively. That Margaret Laurence was relatively unknown in France at the time of publication is clear from the way she is described on the back cover of *Les habitants du feu*: “*Admirée par des écrivains tels que Robertson Davies, Margaret Atwood ou Alice Munro, [Laurence] est considérée au Canada comme un auteur majeur.*”⁴⁰ For the publication of *Une divine plaisanterie*, the publisher sought to counteract this disadvantage by including an afterword by Margaret Atwood. I was unable to locate the original English version of this afterword, but based on its

³⁷. “Aide aux maisons d’édition pour la traduction d’ouvrages en langue française.” Centre national du livre, accessed Apr. 8, 2023, <https://centrenationaldulivre.fr/aides-financement/subvention-aux-editeurs-pour-la-traduction-d-ouvrages-en-langue-francaise>.

³⁸. Margaret Laurence, *Une divine plaisanterie*, trans. Edith Soonckindt (Paris: Joëlle Losfeld, 2006).

³⁹. Margaret Laurence, *Les habitants du feu*, trans. Florence Lévy-Paoloni (Paris: Joëlle Losfeld, 2009).

⁴⁰. Laurence, *Les habitants du feu*, trans. Florence Lévy-Paoloni.

contents, it seems to have been written for a late-1980s UK edition of *A Jest of God*.

As do a great number of books published in France, some of these Joëlle Losfeld translations made their way to Quebec. A 2006 review of *Une divine plaisanterie* in *La Presse* lamented that “[L]e livre est paru en 1966 mais il aura fallu 40 ans et les efforts d’une maison d’édition française pour qu’arrive jusqu’à nous la traduction de ce roman signé par une auteure importante de la littérature canadienne-anglaise.”⁴¹ This statement is of course untrue, but it is revealing; that the author was unaware of the earlier translation of *A Jest of God* confirms my earlier assumption that the CLF translation went out of print in the 1980s or 1990s. The tone also points to a sentiment shared by many Canadians and by Margaret Laurence herself: that it is a shame for our literary market to be so dependent on other countries.

Evidently, certain Quebec publishers had the same train of thought; between 2008 and 2012, Québec-based Éditions Alto and Montréal-based Éditions Nota bene collaboratively published all five books of the *Manawaka Cycle*. The *Cycle* was—at last—brought out in the same order as it was published in English, in attractive and slim paperback editions (though *Les devins*, perhaps due to its 700-odd pages, remains in hardcover). In 2012, Alto and Nota bene released a limited edition three-volume set of the *Manawaka Cycle*. The series is now more affordable to Francophone readers; today, *L’ange de pierre* and *Les devins* retail for \$18.95⁴² and \$12.95 on the Indigo website.⁴³

These translations are the same as those published by Éditions Joëlle Losfeld, and the copyrights for all of them are held by Gallimard, Joëlle

⁴¹. Stéphanie Morin, “Une divine plaisanterie,” *La Presse* (Montréal, QC), July 23, 2006.

⁴². “Ange de pierre (L’): Cycle de Manawaka (Le), T. 01.” *Indigo*, accessed April 8, 2023, https://www.chapters.indigo.ca/en-ca/books/ange-de-pierre-l-cycle/9782923550114-item.html?ref=item_page%3Avariation.

⁴³. “Devins (Les): Cycle de Manawaka (Le), T. 05.” *Indigo*, accessed April 8, 2023, <https://www.chapters.indigo.ca/en-ca/books/devins-les-cycle-de-manawaka/9782923550312-item.html?ikwid=les+devins+margaret+laurence&ikwsec=Home&ikwidx=0#algoliaQueryId=e2f526aaf48b2ef5101785f3b86b67f7>.

Losfeld’s parent company. Only *The Fire-Dwellers* saw a change in title from *Les habitants du feu* to *Ta maison est en feu*. As was confirmed to me via email by Antoine Tanguay, the founder and editor of Éditions Alto, both Alto and Nota bene collaborated with Joëlle Losfeld to obtain the rights to these translations.⁴⁴ Interestingly, in the case of *Un oiseau dans la maison*, the Alto/Nota bene edition published in 2010 lists the translation’s copyright as being held by Joëlle Losfeld, but a cursory comparison with the 1989 Éditions du Roseau edition, which attributes the copyright for the translation to the publisher, reveals the translations to be identical. I was unable to find any evidence that Éditions du Roseau still exists, which likely allowed Joëlle Losfeld to claim copyright more easily.

With these translations, Margaret Laurence appears to have finally reached the Quebec readership Gabrielle Roy wished for her thirty years previously; a 2012 review of the *Manawaka Cycle* in *La Presse* noted that “*les quatre premiers livres se sont déjà vendus à 10 000 exemplaires, preuve que les lecteurs québécois entendent en [Laurence] un écho.*”⁴⁵ The reviewer, David Homel, was full of praise for Laurence, but like the earlier reviewer of *Une divine plaisanterie*, seems to have been relatively unaware of the translation history of her novels, remarking only that “*Laurence, cet écrivain essentiel du Canada anglais, grande dame de la littérature aux côtés de Margaret Atwood et d’Alice Munro, avait eu peu de présence ici auparavant. Un de ses romans, traduit chez Pierre Tisseyre en 1976 par l’écrivain Claire Martin, a vite disparu de la circulation.*”⁴⁶ Homel speculated as to why Laurence might have been under-read in Quebec previously: “*Problème de réception, d’appréciation critique? Peut-être, car à l’époque, on ne lisait pas beaucoup de « canadien ». Sûrement pas de thématique, car l’oeuvre de Laurence est du terrain connu pour nous qui fréquentons le roman québécois.*”⁴⁷ There is undoubtedly some truth to this analysis, but as I have shown, difficulties the CLF encountered long before they even started publishing translations also contributed significantly to the fact that these first-period translations

⁴⁴. Antoine Tanguay, email message to author, April 12, 2023.

⁴⁵. Homel, “Notre voisine méconnue.”

⁴⁶. Ibid.

⁴⁷. Ibid.

had such a short run. There is no sign of reviewers or audiences being hostile or dismissive on account of Laurence being English—or rather Scottish—Canadian; if the politics and spirit of the 1970s and 1980s affected her reception in Quebec, it was unintentionally and indirectly.

It is unclear whether the 10,000 sold copies of these translations—or any of the previous translations—made their way into classrooms at the secondary or post-secondary levels. Some French-language scholarly criticism of Laurence’s work exists, but all the articles I consulted cited the English versions of her novels. Older scholarship tends to place what appears to be the authors’ own translations of quoted passages in the text itself or in footnotes,⁴⁸ while more recent articles simply quote the English text.⁴⁹ Interestingly, much of this French-language criticism is authored by Francophone scholars based outside of Quebec, who presumably have greater exposure to English-Canadian literature than their Quebecois counterparts.

An important question remains about this second, more fruitful period of translation: why did Alto and Nota bene choose to reprint the translations done in France for Joëlle Losfeld, instead of the earlier ones done for the CLF? Antoine Tanguay, still via email, explained: “*J’ai fait le choix de reprendre les droits des traductions de Margaret Laurence pour alto [sic] du côté de Joëlle Losfeld par pur souci financier et logistique. À l’époque, il aurait été impossible de financer une retraduction et en outre, les premières traductions, horribles, chez Tisseyre étaient introuvables.*”⁵⁰ He assured me that this is far from Alto’s current policy when it comes to translation: “*nous faisons maintenant l’impossible pour traduire ici les auteurs et autrices du Canada et les partager avec des éditeurs en France ... Bref, nous encourageons la littérature canadienne en la traduisant ici pour la faire voyager en France, ce qui est l’inverse de ce qui se pratiquait il y a*

⁴⁸. See for example: E. D. Blodgett, “Le mythe des ethnies dans les romans de l’Ouest canadien : du père dominateur à la mère conciliatrice,” *Voix et Images* 9, no. 1 (1983); Terrance Ryan Hughes, “Gabrielle Roy et Margaret Laurence : deux chemins, une recherche,” PhD diss. (McGill University, 1980).

⁴⁹. Isabelle Kirouac-Massicotte, “Des ‘déchets humains’ : esthétique trash et partage du sensible chez Margaret Laurence,” *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature Canadienne* 44, no. 2 (2019).

⁵⁰. Tanguay, email message to author.

quelques années. J’y vois une victoire.”⁵¹ Clearly, the choice of translation was not made out of lack of consideration for Laurence’s wishes; Tanguay expresses an appreciation of the Canadian literary industry with which she would no doubt agree.

Bridging the linguistic gap: A comparison of four translations

Laurence might not agree, however, with Tanguay’s characterization of the CLF translations as “horrible.” In a letter to Gabrielle Roy about the translation of *The Diviners*, she asserted: “I am quite certain the translation is an excellent one. As I think I told you, Michelle Robinson (the daughter of Michelle and Pierre Tisseyre), who translated it, is a wonderful young woman ... and she has taken all kinds of care with the translation. It should really be Michelle who autographs it to you, not me.”⁵² To gauge the quality of the translations, as well as any differences between translations done in Quebec and France, I propose comparing short passages from both translation periods. To ensure that any tendencies that come to light are more than idiosyncrasies on the part of the translators, I will compare translations of *A Jest of God* and *The Stone Angel*, which will incorporate the work of two Quebecois translators and two French translators.

The translations of *A Jest of God* provide an obvious Quebec-France contrast from their titles alone. Michelle Robinson titled her 1981 CLF translation *Un Dieu farceur*, while Edith Soonckindt called her 2006 work *Une divine plaisanterie*; though “*plaisanterie*” can be used in Canadian French, it is a distinctly more European word. A similar tendency can be observed in passages of dialogue—for example, at the beginning of Chapter 5, when Rachel speaks to Calla over the phone. The original English version reads: “I’d like to go, Calla, but I don’t think I can for a while. I’m—I’m going to take an extension course in English, and I’ll be pretty well tied up with that for the rest of the month.” [...]

⁵¹. Ibid.

⁵². Roy and Laurence, *Intimate Strangers*, 77–78.

“Listen, Calla—I’ll phone you, eh? In a little while. When I’m—when I’ve got things straightened out.”

“Yeh. Sure, Rachel. Okay.” Her voice sounds drab, unresisting.

“When do you go to your brother’s?” I must take some interest; I must at least be polite.

“I’m not going there this summer. Two of his kids have chickenpox, and I’ve never had it.”⁵³

Michelle Robinson renders the passage as follows:

— J’aimerais bien, Calla, mais je ne pense pas que ce sera possible pendant quelque temps. Je ... Je vais commencer un cours de recyclage en anglais, et ça va me prendre tout mon temps d’ici la fin du mois ...

— Écoute, Calla, je te téléphonerai, hein? Dans quelque temps. Quand je serai ... quand j’aurai mis de l’ordre dans tout ça.

— Ouais! Sûr, Rachel. D’accord. Sa voix est terne, soumise.

— Quand vas-tu chez ton frère?

Il faut que j’aie au moins l’air de prendre intérêt. Il faut tout de même que je sois polie.

— Je n’y vais pas, cet été. Deux de ses enfants ont la varicelle, et je ne l’ai jamais eue.⁵⁴

In Edith Soonckindt’s translation, the passage becomes:

« J’aimerais bien t’accompagner, Calla, mais je ne pense pas pouvoir avant un certain temps. Je dois ... je dois bûcher des cours, et je serai joliment prise avec ça pour le restant du mois. [...]

« Écoute, Calla, je t’appellerai, d’accord? Dans quelque temps. Quand je ... quand les choses seront plus claires.

— Oui. D’accord, Rachel, O. K. » Sa voix est terne, elle n’oppose pas la moindre résistance.

⁵³. Margaret Laurence, *A Jest of God* (1966; reis., Toronto: Penguin Modern Classics, 2018), 85–86.

⁵⁴. Margaret Laurence, *Un Dieu farceur*, trans. Michelle Robinson (Montréal: Le Cercle du livre de France, 1981), 101.

« Tu vas quand, chez ton frère? » Je prends l’air intéressé, ou du moins je reste polie.

« Je n’irai pas là-bas cet été. Deux de ses gosses ont la varicelle et moi je ne l’ai jamais eue.⁵⁵

Michelle Robinson’s translation contains one identifiable French Canadian colloquialism—“*hein?*”—and one turn of phrase not seen often in European French—“*avoir l’air*,” in “[*i*] faut que j’aie au moins l’air de prendre intérêt.” Edith Soonckindt’s translation contains three European French colloquialisms: “*je dois bâcher*,” “*je serai joliment prise*,” and “*gosses*.” These expressions would stand out to any French-Canadian reader and clearly mark the book as European. Whether a European reader encountering Michelle Robinson’s translation would immediately identify it as French-Canadian is more difficult to ascertain, both because my perspective is French-Canadian and because Robinson uses fewer distinctive words and expressions.

In comparison to the original English version, Michelle Robinson’s earlier translation matches the syntax and punctuation more closely. In this particular passage, this allows her to better replicate instances of listing and repetition in Laurence’s original style. For example, where Laurence writes “[Calla’s] voice sounds drab, unresisting,” Robinson writes “*Sa voix est terne, soumise*,” while Edith Soonckindt renders the phrase as “*Sa voix est terne, elle n’oppose pas la moindre résistance*.” Similarly, Laurence’s “I must take some interest; I must at least be polite” is rendered by Robinson as “*Il faut que j’aie au moins l’air de prendre intérêt. Il faut tout de même que je sois polie*,” and by Soonckindt as “*Je prends l’air intéressé, ou du moins je reste polie*.” By transposing the syntax between languages, Robinson maintains some of the original rhythm of Laurence’s prose; Soonckindt takes more liberties with the syntax and colloquialisms she employs. This does not necessarily signal a poorer translation, but simply different approaches; the CLF

⁵⁵. Margaret Laurence, *Une divine plaisanterie*, trans. Edith Soonckindt (Paris: Éditions Joëlle Losfeld, 2006), 99.

seems to favour a more conservative approach to their translations as well as their catalogue of original publications.

While Alto and Nota bene did not have the financial means to have the *Manawaka Cycle* retranslated when they published it, Antoine Tanguay’s remarks suggest that they were conscious of why both authors and readers often prefer Canadian texts to be translated in Canada. The text itself confirms this, as certain European French expressions were substituted for Canadian French expressions; for example, in the Alto/Nota bene edition of *Une divine plaisanterie*, in the passage quoted above, the word “*enfants*” has been substituted for “*gosses*.”⁵⁶ This appears to have been a consistent practice, as a brief comparison of the Joëlle Losfeld and Alto/Nota bene editions of Florence Lévy-Paoloni’s translation of *The Fire-Dwellers* reveals similar substitutions. Where the Joëlle Losfeld edition uses words like “*gamins*,”⁵⁷ “*gâteau*,” or “*petit déjeuner*,”⁵⁸ the Alto/Nota bene edition replaces them with “*enfants*,”⁵⁹ “*biscuit*,” and “*déjeuner*.”⁶⁰ The Quebecois editors clearly took care to ensure that the language used in their edition would not be too jarring for French-Canadian readers.

Translations of *The Stone Angel* feature very different contrasting characteristics compared to *A Jest of God*. Consider a passage from Chapter 4, first in the original English:

“You sure worked early this morning, Marv,” John chipped in, “and I know why. You went straight out to work when you got home, and I know when it was. Five. I’ve got the old alarm clock in my room now. I was awake. I seen you.”

“Shut your trap,” Marvin said. “What do you know of it?”

⁵⁶. Margaret Laurence, *Une divine plaisanterie*, trans. Edith Soonckindt (Québec/Montréal: Éditions Alto/Éditions Nota bene, 2008), 135.

⁵⁷. Margaret Laurence, *Les habitants du feu*, trans. Florence Lévy-Paoloni (Paris: Joëlle Losfeld, 2009), 9.

⁵⁸. Ibid, 11.

⁵⁹. Margaret Laurence, *Ta maison est en feu*, trans. Florence Lévy-Paoloni (Québec/Montréal: Éditions Alto/Éditions Nota bene, 2009), 13.

⁶⁰. Ibid, 17.

I used to hate it when they squabbled. It made my head ache. Marvin was so much older. I hated to see him picking on John. John wasn't blameless, either, I admit. But sometimes, like then, I felt too worn out to argue.

“*Saw*,” I told John. “Not *seen*.”⁶¹

Then in Claire Martin's 1976 CLF translation:

— Tu as commencé à travailler de bonne heure ce matin, dit John, et je sais pourquoi. Tu es parti travailler tout de suite et je sais l'heure qu'il était. Cinq heures. La vieille pendule est dans ma chambre à présent. J'étais éveillé. Je t'ai vu.

— Tais-toi donc, dit Marvin, Tu ne sais pas ce que tu dis.

J'avais horreur qu'ils se chamaillent. Cela me donnait mal à la tête. Marvin était bien plus vieux que John et je n'aimais pas qu'il lui cherche querelle. Bien souvent, je l'admets, c'est John qui avait tort. J'étais trop fatiguée pour discuter.⁶²

And, finally, in Sophie Bastide-Foltz's 2007 translation:

— En tout cas t'as travaillé très tôt ce matin, Marv, dit John qui aimait mettre son grain de sel, et j'sais pourquoi. T'es parti travailler tout de suite après être rentré, et j'sais l'heure qu'il était. Cinq heures. J'ai le vieux réveil dans ma chambre à présent. J'étais réveillé. Je t'as vu.

— Ta gueule, dit Marvin. Tu racontes n'importe quoi. »

J'avais horreur de ça quand ils se chamaillaient. Ça me donnait mal à la tête. Marvin était bien plus vieux que John et je ne supportais pas de le voir rouspéter après lui. John n'était pas sans reproche, non plus, il faut bien l'admettre. Mais parfois, comme ce jour-là, je me sentais trop fourbue pour discuter.

« Je t'ai vu, dis-je à John. Pas je t'as vu. »⁶³

⁶¹. Margaret Laurence, *The Stone Angel* (1964; reis., Toronto: Penguin Modern Classics, 2017), 133–134.

⁶². Margaret Laurence, *L'ange de pierre*, trans. Claire Martin, (Montréal: Le Cercle du livre de France, 1976), 136.

⁶³. Margaret Laurence, *L'ange de pierre*, trans. Sophie-Bastide-Foltz (Québec/Montréal: Éditions Alto/Éditions Nota bene, 2008), 183.

The most obvious difference between these two translations is one of register; Martin uses a much more formal diction in the dialogue, while Bastide-Foltz seeks to phonetically and syntactically reproduce casual speech. Like Michelle Robinson's sparse use of French-Canadian colloquialisms, Martin's choice to use a higher register might be attributable to the relative conservatism of the CLF. Martin also chose to omit Hagar's correction of John's grammar, while Bastide-Foltz carried it over. In this sense, Bastide-Foltz's translation is the more faithful. However, Martin may have judged that the exact character of John's grammatical error would be difficult to transpose. In the original English text, John says "I seen you," a common expression in certain varieties of colloquial English. Bastide-Foltz's "*je t'as vu*," on the other hand, is not an everyday formulation of colloquial French, and Hagar's obsession with correct grammar comes through elsewhere in Martin's translation, such as when Doris says that "*Marvin et moi, on prend une tasse de thé*," and Hagar reflects: "*Je pince les lèvres. Marvin et moi, on prend. Il aurait pu se trouver une femme qui savait parler correctement.*"⁶⁴ This is an expression that is quite common in colloquial Canadian French, and its inclusion indicates that Martin's later omission of John's grammatical error was likely done out of a desire to keep the errors realistic. Therefore, her translation of the above passage is faithful in another sense.

The fact that there is no clear-cut conclusion to be drawn from these comparisons is nothing if not representative of the overall history of French-language translation of the *Manawaka Cycle*. Margaret Laurence began writing at a time when there was little institutional support for the literary industry, and even less for the translation industry. By the time translation grants from the Canada Council became available, the political and linguistic debates raging in Quebec had plunged the publisher of Laurence's translated novels into financial difficulty. Decades later, the *Manawaka Cycle* was finally published in full in Quebec, albeit using

⁶⁴. Laurence, *L'ange de pierre*, trans. Claire Martin, 35.

translations done in France. The history of these translations is intimately tied to the political and literary histories of Quebec and Canada, but also dependent on a host of other factors, including the whims of publishers. This brief historical account reveals the importance of governmental funding for translation, as only the very first translations of Laurence’s novels seem to have been completed without support from either the Canada Council or the CNL. It also demonstrates how quickly translations can become lost or forgotten when they go out of print; even for a well-known and canonized author like Margaret Laurence, translation remains a fickle business. And yet, when the linguistic gap is bridged, French-Canadian readers and reviewers, by and large, report appreciation, connection, and learning—all the things one can hope to gain from reading a good book.

Violette Drouin is a master’s student in the Department of English at McGill University. Their research focuses on ecocriticism and Canadian literature.

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