

# Canadian Cryptic: The Sacred, the Profane, and the Translatable

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THE BATTLE BETWEEN pro- and anti-postmodern factions in current criticism is often played out around the political implications of the absence of what Derrida calls the “transcendental signified” or the postmodern condition’s ir retrievable loss of master narratives. All the insights into the workings of language and its inevitable grounding — or lack of grounding — in what is not “reality” or “truth” but ideology and discourse have been greeted as a welcome liberation from the totalizing tyranny of epistemological paradigms by some, while reacted against with horror by others as a sign of decadence and an excuse for moral irresponsibility.<sup>1</sup> The presumed immanence that has supplanted the modernist quest for transcendence through art is illustrated by many techniques common to postmodern literature, all of which aim at dislocating the old “truths” about transcendence, about reference, and about the transparent relationship between word and world. The dependence of postmodern texts on pretexts and intertexts, whether expressed in the favouring of pastiche, parody, collage, or other more or less cannibalistic strategies, seems to point to the realization of the impossibility of transcending the prison-house of language. Yet the search for the transcendental signified still goes on, even in the midst of the current accumulation of evidence against its existence. Many postmodern writers insist on finding what Thomas Pynchon, in *The Crying of Lot 49*, nostalgically refers to as “the epileptic word,” the original, sacred, absolute Word which would allow us a glimpse into the beyond, and this search, I would argue, can be seen in the very texts that explicitly set out to prove its impossibility.

In Canada, the postmodern writer's dilemma is, as we have been frequently told since the sixties, compounded by the difficulty inherent in the postcolonial quest for the right "fit" between word and world, or more specifically between language and place. This much discussed problem is particularly interesting in light of Canada's lack of myths or culturally "sacred" texts which could serve as pretexts for even a parodic search for identity. Settler colonies often lack the indigenous cultural and linguistic material which may serve to anchor a new culture, and the problem is exacerbated when, as was the case in Canada at the time of arrival of postmodernism, the struggle for cultural definition is carried out in the shadow of an already established culture with which the newcomer shares a language.<sup>2</sup> It is these two issues that inform this study: the simultaneous and paradoxical coexistence of a postmodern consciousness of the entrapment in language and its nostalgia for a lost transcendence, and the particular search for a language appropriate to the postcolonial self-definition.

Postmodernism teaches us that it is at the borderlines or in the margins that the transformative power of language is put to the test. This is where the search for the "ineffable" or sacred takes place, and it is here, where the word gestures toward transcendence that the appropriateness of the particular, natural language to the task can be measured.

The term "sacred" and its analogue "cryptic" are used here rather loosely and from the point of view of their linguistic peculiarity, to indicate the locus of transcendence. According to Walter Benjamin and Jacques Derrida, the sacred is the part of language that, in the latter's terms, is *traductible* but not *traduisible*. In the common, pragmatic sense the translatable (*le traduisible*) depends on the divisibility of signifier from signified, and the consequent possibility of paraphrase; it works on the level of the sentence, which is the unit of sense. The "sacred" or revelatory *word*, however, falls outside "sense"; it is found where the signified collapses into the signifier so that the separation between the two required by translation, as well as by any other metalinguistic operation, becomes impossible. The sacred word thus functions as a pure signifier; "Amen" is a sacred word, according to Henri Gobard, because it cannot possibly be translated or paraphrased

as "OK," although the two would seem to share the same affirmative signified (27). The "meaning" of the sacred or cryptic sign is a mystery and it is as such resistant to interpretation. What it offers is a sudden revelation.

George Steiner argues that two possibilities are open to the writer at the limits of language: on the one hand silence and, on the other, polyglot babble—what he refers to as respectively the Beckettian and the Joycean mode. The latter seems to be favoured by current critics as exemplary of what Bakhtinian criticism would define as the carnivalesque novel, a genre particularly suited to the syncretism of many postcolonial cultures. Ihab Hassan would argue that American, to most critics the paradigmatic post-modern, literature tends towards the former, while many critics have shown convincingly how postcolonial writers — Salman Rushdie usually being brought forward as the best example — often tend toward the latter.<sup>4</sup> Although Hassan's contention is arguable, it is indeed more difficult to think of American writers, until recently, who have chosen the latter way. The comparison with American texts is not completely gratuitous in our context; at the time when postmodernism entered the Canadian literary scene, the cultural debate in the country was set largely within a paradigm of cultural colonization with the United States and its cultural monopoly cast in the role of colonizer. The close link between cultural exile and formal and linguistic experimentation has often been pointed out both in the modernist and the postcolonial canon; a certain homelessness in one's language seems to be conducive to its rejuvenation. Although Canadian writers tend to stay at home, the theme of exile is very present in their work, only it is most often described in terms of being in exile in one's own country and one's own language. As the protagonist in Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* puts it when she travels back to her childhood home in Northern Ontario, "Now we're on my home ground, foreign territory" (11). This simultaneity of foreignness and familiarity is, as we will see in the following, an inherent aspect both of the sacred and the uncanny, which can be joined under the label "cryptic," as designating something undecipherable yet meaningful.

While both of the modes identified by Steiner appear in Canadian literature as well, a third strategy seems particularly favoured

at the crucial period of cultural self-definition in the 1960s and 1970s. This is the tendency to resort to foreign, or even non-existent, languages at transgressive moments. I am not talking here of the incorporation of other natural languages as a means of defining a specific cultural identity, a common enough phenomenon in any text that adopts a marginal or ethnic stance. Nor can these occurrences be attributed to any inherent heteroglossia or cultural syncretism; most of the novels I will be discussing resort to languages that are not obviously motivated by either socio-political or narrative concerns.

Some would argue that the texts under discussion are not all to be classified without qualification as postmodern; my argument for including them is that they all display a common preoccupation with the possibilities and limitations of language, expressed linguistically in terms that reveal an underlying striving towards transcendence.

In Margaret Laurence's *A Jest of God*, Rachel Cameron, at a crucial moment and to her great embarrassment, speaks in tongues. This happens when she accompanies her friend Calla to a revivalist church. It may be argued that this glossolalia is nothing but an eruption of Rachel's repressed sexuality, her first utterance that exceeds the conventional small talk governing life in Manawaka, and thus easily dismissed as a hysterical symptom. The narration (by Rachel) makes quite clear that we are not witnessing a religious experience in the usual sense of the word, and Rachel's embarrassment stems from her shame over her uncontrolled behaviour. Yet it is equally clear that the "spirit" which infuses the rest of the visitors to the Tabernacle is, in some form and in spite of her resistance, present in Rachel. In her own words, the gift of tongues is "the forbidden transformed cryptically to nonsense, dragged from the crypt, stolen and shouted . . ." (36). This language is cryptic in the sense of being from the crypt, originating in the sacred underground, as it were, and it is "forbidden" or taboo. Rachel's definition of glossolalia also points to the analogy between the sacred and the nonsensical; both are pure signifiers and, having no "sense," they are immune to translation. The glossolalic signifier is a truly magic word — as opposed to the mother May Cameron's "magic word" of empty convention, "please" (95). The cryptic

signifier is not empty; rather it is pregnant with meaning. Although narrative restrictions prevent Rachel from reproducing her own utterance — as narrator she cannot herself discern the alien sounds she is making — we are given an earlier example when she transcribes an unknown parishioner's ecstasy as: "Galamani halafka tabinota caragoya lal lal ufranti" (35), an utterance whose graphic reproduction underscores its strangeness.

The description of the voice that speaks through Rachel identifies it as ghostly, as the voice of a *spirit* intruding on her conscious reasoning, which violently denies its existence. What Rachel, in her role as self-conscious narrator following what might be called the phallogocentric conventions of reason, discards as hysteria is at the same time, through her own choice of words, shown as something frightening, uncanny, and potentially transcendent. This kind of irruption into a text of something that transgresses the established order looks like an example of what Julia Kristeva would call the semiotic "chora," or the vestigial traces of the pre-Oedipal realm in which the infant dwells before its entry into what Jacques Lacan labels the "symbolic order," which is that of language as reason and law. To both Kristeva and Lacan the symbolic is linked to the position of the father in patriarchal society, while the imaginary, which is closer to the "chora," pertains to the marginalized realm of femininity.<sup>5</sup> It originates in the pulsions of the body and it expresses itself in linguistic phenomena that defy classification in terms of the symbolic. I will return to Laurence's novel later in another context that will, I believe, further explain its inclusion in my chosen corpus.

The second, and quite different, case in my brief inventory of the Canadian cryptic is Robert Kroetsch's *The Studhorse Man* which, like all of his novels, is obsessed with origins and ends, genesis and apocalypse, birth and death. The quest in this novel is the search for the perfect mare/mother of a new dynasty of horses. It is, in other words, a quest for a new origin and, at the same time, a literalization of the search for the mother as the lost object of desire. As so often in Kroetsch's fictional universe, the parodic quest ends where it begins. No dynasty is founded; the protagonist dies at the hooves of the potential sire, who ends up in a wonderfully paradoxical position, which reflects the conflation

of beginnings and ends. The task of the stallion Poseidon is to keep a stableful of mares continually pregnant in order to prevent pregnancy; PMU, pregnant mares' urine, is a crucial ingredient in birth control pills. It is not coincidental that the studhorse is nicknamed "Poesy"; this pregnancy without end, and without issue, may serve as a metaphor for the writer's quest as well as the reader's, and Kroetsch's novel can be seen as manifesting the typically postmodern obsession with the ways in which we create meaning in a world which has lost its transcendental signified(s). The narrative quest is analogous to Rachel Cameron's presumed pregnancy which turns out to be nothing but a benign tumour, but which in a modest way gives birth to a new Rachel, who, again paradoxically, becomes her mother's mother, as she begins her first journey at the end of the novel.

The journey of Hazard, the studhorse man, with Poseidon goes from mare to mare, from potential mother to potential mother, as Kroetsch tries to encompass the Canadian experience, the one that goes "a mari usque ad mare." As Hazard goes from Martha, his eternal fiancée, to Marie, without seeming to consummate anything, the horse trots from mare to mare without issue. The only generative thing in the text is the signifier, as the Latin "mare," translated into the French "mer" — homonymous with the French word for mother — generates the English "mare," before it proliferates into a merry-go-round of mare-related names and words. The signified is generated from the signifier and, in the final instance, it is this generative power of the word that engenders the plot. It could be argued that Kroetsch's novel constitutes a giant pun on desire; as Poseidon, Poesy, aims at siring, becoming original, he and his analogue, the text itself, only succeed in de-siring. No matter how long the stallion stays in the stable, the pregnant mare/word will never arrive at a stable meaning.

When Poseidon, whose movements constitute the plot, is "born" out of a lake, the Indian who saves him tells Hazard: "Kis-see-wus-kut-tã-o" (69). The Cree phrase is repeated twice but remains untranslated, and we are given no hint as to the meaning of the seemingly prophetic utterance. Two things are significant in the context, however: as in the case of Rachel's glossolalia, the phrase is spoken (by the Indian boy) and later inscribed in writing

(by Demeter Proudfoot, Hazard's biographer), and it is unfamiliar to those who hear or read it (Hazard, Demeter, and the intended reader, Martha Proudfoot, as well as most real readers). The context of birth from water underscores the ritual and baptismal significance of the cryptic utterance; its only possible "meaning" is the origin of "Poesy."

In a later novel by Kroetsch, *Gone Indian*, the protagonist Jeremy Sadness is beaten up by the white men who believe him to be an Indian who has made the mistake of winning a snowshoe race, thus usurping their place of privilege. Without understanding what he is saying, Jeremy tells his tormentors: "Va fa'nculo . . . Vatte fa' fot'. Va fa'nculo" (92). This is the moment of truth when Jeremy finally understands what "going Indian" means, and here the ritual/baptismal nature of the episode is reflected in his metamorphosis, as he dons the clothes of the real Indian, Daniel Beaver, and is washed by Mrs. Beaver. In a way, Jeremy also suffers from an interminable pregnancy; despite numerous conceptions and years of gestation, his doctoral dissertation will not see the light of day until he has understood the meaning of going Indian, which at this moment is revealed to be inexpressible in the academic jargon that represents the symbolic order. What Jeremy does not know is that his profanity is a resurfacing of his repressed childhood; Jeremy is speaking a language of origins, street talk from the little Italy where he grew up; it is both "home ground" and "foreign territory." Coming from another place the phrase is a ghost of a sort, it is uncanny in Freud's sense of the word — both familiar (remembered) and unfamiliar (not understood) — and it is, yet again, spoken. The graphic rendering of the spoken word in the text, as in the case of *The Studhorse Man*, underscores the unfamiliarity. The profanity of Jeremy's words does not contradict the sacred, even sacramental, function of the utterance but rather indicates the close link between the sacred and the profane.

In Dave Godfrey's *The New Ancestors*, it is the Akan language that performs a cryptic function. Godfrey's novel is set mostly in a newly-independent Ghana, thinly disguised as "Lost Coast," which becomes an allegory of any newly-independent postcolonial country. While the narration is in English, some parts of this novel must, in terms both of the verisimilitude governing the political

discourse and the fictional logic governing the whole, be considered as “translated.” This is particularly evident in the interior monologue of Ama Burdener, the Ghanaian wife of the protagonist, British teacher Michael Burdener. Although Ama’s monologue comes to us in English, it is prefaced by an untranslated epigraph which is explained as an Akan song, and consequently linked to an oral culture. Embodying Africa, Ama—wife and mother—represents love and orality. She talks and sings but, unlike her husband, does not write. While untranslated African expressions and phrases occur in other sections of the novel as well, their meaning is in most cases made clear, if not through explicit translation, by way of repetition and implicit explanations in English. Ama’s song, on the other hand, remains a pure signifier to the English-speaking reader.

Translation is also explicitly thematized in this novel, both in Ama’s monologue and the rest of the novel, usually in a parodic mode. Sometimes the parody is implicit and only obvious to the assiduous critic. Thus, for instance, Robert Margeson has made an inventory of the Akan proverbs that, again without translation, occur as subtitles in another chapter of the book. Margeson’s study shows that these proverbs are “translated” in the text in such a way as to literalize, and consequently parody, their metaphoricality. This occurs, however, in the chapter called “Freedom People’s Party,” which satirizes the political corruption of the newly-independent country. The public world, with its reliance on words as propaganda or tools of manipulation, is one of corruption, and its spokesmen are directly linked to the media, particularly print. In the arena of politics, translation becomes linked to corruption, as the symbolic order is controlled by politicians, with the corrupt dictator, the false “Redeemer,” occupying the place of the father. The relation of analogy between translation and profanation of the sacred is clearly thematized throughout this chapter.

A translation of Ama’s song, on the other hand (which can only be undertaken by somebody familiar with her language), reveals no trace of irony. It sings of slavery and ancestor worship, embodying the heritage of her culture.<sup>6</sup> But to the intended reader the song will remain unfamiliar, nonsensical, cryptic. Godfrey’s text links motherhood, love, orality, and the “origin” of Africa to this



pure signifier in a way that, again, seems to associate the cryptic with the imaginary and the "chora." The fact that the novel is written by a man may be significant in the context: it is not coincidental that Africa becomes both Freud's dark continent of female sexuality and the locus of the Lacanian imaginary.

My final case study, perhaps the most interesting one and contemporary with the very different novel with which I began this exploration, is Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers*, a text which may, in fact, serve as a gloss to all of the others. Cohen's novel is paradigmatic in many ways, and it will serve to elucidate the implications of my analyses of the cryptic or sacred in the other texts. Written by an English Canadian Jew living in Montreal and intimately familiar with French Canadian history and culture, it epitomizes the postcolonial position of marginality and internal exile. It is with reason that Linda Hutcheon opens her discussion of the Canadian postmodern with this novel, and it is not surprising that she calls on Bakhtin in her analysis of it. Yet I will argue — and as my discussion has shown this adds to, rather than detracts from, its Canadianness — that it is a text that should be read "in Greek." Greek appears in the text as a sacred language in an inscription outside the temple of Isis, which translates loosely as "Isis am I who gives birth to all and everyone and my veil has not been lifted" (231; the translation is not given in the text.) In accordance with the importance given to the signifier in this novel, Isis should probably be read Is-is, as embodying the mystery of being and presence. The first appearance of Greek in the novel, however, happens in the prosaic text of a phrase book for tourists, given the narrator in return for "an oral favor . . . performed for a restaurateur friend" (71). A reproduction of one page of this book ends the first part of the novel, the unnamed narrator's "History of Them All." The page in question represents various possibilities of conversation (orality yet again) in a drugstore, and the last word we see is "Eucharisto," rendered in the Greek alphabet, then correctly and innocuously translated as "Thank you" (180). The Eucharistic intertext is hidden behind the unfamiliarity, at least to the anglophone reader, of the Greek letters, which turns the word into a pure signifier in a manner reminiscent of the Akan proverbs and Ama's song in *The New Ancestors*, and which is both

profaned and implicitly parodied in the translation which reduces the mystery of the Eucharist to an empty "thank you." The relation between the two is analogous to that between Rachel's cryptic glossolalia and her mother's conventionally "magic" word "please."

The transformation of substances which runs through Cohen's novel culminates in a metamorphosis, in which three once distinct identities fuse into one unholy trinity, which ultimately becomes the beam of the projector of a Ray Charles movie escaping from the "System theatre" and projecting itself in the sky. This escape from systems, from the symbolic order, into a cosmic metamorphosis is a kind of collective 1960s wish-fulfilment, but it is also the ultimate in skywriting, a complete fusion of language with the beyond, a total transcendence. At the same time, it harks back to the novel's epigraph — the line "Somebody said lift that bale" from Ray Charles *singing* "Ol' Man River." Revelation as a vision in the heavens merges with the spoken (or sung) word. It is the magic power of the signifier that forms the connections that lead to the final revelation; through the beam/*ray* the skywriting of *Charles* Axis, which was the guiding star of the narrator as a young boy, becomes the revelatory word, as the comic strip enters the heavens. Pop culture becomes the new religion, but through a transubstantiation performed by the magic of the word. And again we are faced with the convergence of mystery and orality, as well as with the archetypal, Tiresian connection between blindness and insight. (Ray Charles is a blind singer.)

The immediate, political truth in Cohen's novel has to do with the possibility of a "revolution of the second chancers," the "white niggers" — slaves, lifters of bales — of Quebec as well as its Indians and Jews. The lifting of the bale becomes the lifting of the veil of Isis, which in the codes of the 1960s becomes a transcending of the arbitrary separation between reality and fiction created by the movie screen. But this can only happen through the mediation of Greek. In modern Greek, the letter *B* is pronounced *V*; read "in Greek" the word "bale" would be pronounced "veil." It is only when articulated orally (sung, for instance) that *B* becomes *V*, but the metamorphosis is, paradoxically, made possible through the *inscription* of the Greek word, whose unfamiliarity to the anglophone reader ensures its functioning as pure, hence sacred,

signifier, its transformative, revelatory power signalled by the crucial "Eucharisto." This word clearly assumes the "seminal" function alluded to in the narrator's account of his reception of the phrase book—an unholy communion—as it engenders the sacramental imagery that runs through the text. It would seem, then, that the mystery of being (*B*), embodied by *Is-is* in Cohen's novel, with all its ontological overtones, becomes the arrow of the *V* whose vanishing point is the sacrament of the Eucharist, the Western paradigm of the transformative power of the Word. The gift of translation, the phrase book, is given with the infusion of "spirit" in the Shakespearean sense, and it becomes a kind of holy scripture; the narrator refers to it as a prayer book. Through a number of pentecostal puns relating to speaking in, and with, tongues, the text fuses body with spirit, and some kind of supreme power speaks through the body of the narrator. Speaking in tongues equals speaking with and from the body, of which the tongue is the most prominent part in this text. The spirit irrupting into this text is a holy and unholy ghost at the same time. In the final instance, Cohen's own novel becomes an analogue of the prayer book; the reader has to perform an "oral favor" by, as it were, reading the text aloud through its Greek grid. Only in this way can the spirit of the word infuse the reader. A translation has to be performed here, but it is one that consists not of setting something over the text in the traditional sense of *übersetzung*—the text is not *traduisible* but *traductible* in Derrida's terms; it must be transferred into the sacred realm of the Greek word.

A peculiar paradox has surfaced implicitly in my discussion. Canadian postmodern literature has often been identified with the feminine side of the gender duality, not only because of the strong presence of women writers in the country but because, at least since Kristeva's identification of marginality with the feminine, women's writing has become the paradigm for subversive or, to use Hutcheon's term, ex-centric, discourse. Although this common metaphoric equation between a condition of marginalization based on gender and one based on nationality or ethnicity is problematic in an age that claims to emphasize difference over sameness, it is intriguing in our present context. The metaphor of the immanence of the sacred as interminable pregnancy, with all

its female associations, is not coincidental, and the close link between the sacred and the presymbolic, or the *chora*, is evident in all of the analyzed novels. Yet all but one of the texts discussed here — and that the least obviously postmodern — are written by men. *The Studhorse Man* is particularly interesting in its subversion of the masculinist quest motif which seems to govern the diegesis but which only succeeds in pointing to its own sterility while illustrating the generative power of the maternal signifier. This novel is indeed exemplary in its manifestation of the link between desire, the mother, and the originary signifier which culminates in the untranslated Cree phrase that “gives birth” to Poesy. The unsuccessful quest also illustrates Lacan’s notion of the itinerary of desire. It moves metonymically; as the phallic studhorse with his human appendage flits from mare to mare, the narrative moves from signifier to signifier without ever connecting with any real signified. It shows desire as de-siring, dethroning the phallic father, as the narrative institutes in his place the eternally and paradoxically pregnant mother-to-be, and it can thus be read as an example — albeit parodic — of the kind of subversion usually associated with the feminine.<sup>7</sup>

In the case of *A Jest of God*, however, the Lacanian gender hierarchies seem to be inverted. Although Rachel’s glossolalia, as we have seen, can be conveniently identified with the maternally defined *chora* as it interrupts a patriarchal liturgy (and is, furthermore, we are told, warned against by St. Paul, that archetypal misogynist), the ghost haunting this text is not that of a lost mother but of a dead father. Indeed, the “name of the father” does not seem to represent the law in Rachel’s world. (His name, Niall, seems in fact to make every address to him a gesture of subjugation.) Rather it is the mother who is the holder of the particular transcendental signified of Manawaka which is the narrow and suffocating one of small-town convention. In the Cameron family romance, the father is the one explicitly connected with the crypt; as a mortician, he dwells in the lower regions, intimately, even lovingly, linked with death. As the mother reneges the body, the father is familiar with its every frailty, and Rachel suspects that he loves the dead, or the “stiffs” as his successor, Hector Jonas, calls them in what might be an unsubtle pun on the link between

sexuality and death and which takes on rather ironic overtones in a Lacanian reading (124). This cliché is played out much more radically in the works of Kroetsch and Cohen, but it is interesting to see how the conventional association in male texts of sex/death with the female/maternal is inverted in Laurence's novel, where the almost disembodied mother forever hovers on the brink of death without being able to accomplish the final act. In the end, she is not dead but metaphorically reborn as Rachel's child; the reversal of their relationship is the outcome of Rachel's false pregnancy and the mother is consequently identified as a kind of benign tumour, something inconsequential that does not belong in the body.

It is ironic that May Cameron's "please" is the same word used by the Manawaka boys of Rachel's adolescence to make the girls submit to their sexual advances. "Please" is the word for good girls, yet succumbing to its "magic" makes them bad girls, a transformation evidenced in the ostracism which results from any premarital pregnancy which is carried to term. Laurence's playing with words may not look postmodern, but it illustrates the ambiguity of meaning and the (Lacanian) slipperiness of the signified, and it also problematizes the poststructuralist gendering of law and desire.

At least one crucial question is still left unanswered, however. If the cryptic, sacred language is that of the imaginary, which would explain its frequent association with origins, orality, and the mother (at least in male texts), why does it have to take shape in the *inscription* of a particular signifier? Why does the sacred always appear to look for its scripture?<sup>8</sup> That is, why are we not simply told (as in the case of Rachel, for instance) that somebody speaks a different tongue? Yet even Rachel, whose narrative situation prevents her from transcribing her own gibberish, insists on giving us a written example of glossolalia. The association of the oral with the feminine implies its counterpart, the identification of the written with the masculine, as seen most clearly in *The New Ancestors*. The convergence of the two in the sacred would seem to reinforce its place of origin as beyond, or before, dualities, as we have already seen in its transcendence of the boundary between what modern society constructs as the sacred and the profane.<sup>9</sup>

The original coincidence of these perceived opposites would also lead in the direction of the Derridean “originary supplement” and to a “grammatological” reading. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida deconstructs the traditional hierarchy which sees speech as primary to writing and shows that the difference which to Saussure constitutes the (non)essence of language is, in fact, a question of the trace or “grammé” and hence a matter of visibility. This is illustrated in Derrida’s own play on “différance,” in which homonymy conceals the polysemic properties of the signifier — its generative potential — until they are revealed by its inscription (the important difference, the *a*, is not heard but seen). I would also argue that Derrida’s notion of “différance,” rather than refuting meaning, holds out the same kind of promise as these Canadian texts: that of a pregnancy of the word whose outcome is endlessly deferred. Poesy’s travels again function as an allegorical analogue to the Derridean story. Indeed, Poseidon’s generative organ, as prodigious and unsuccessful as it is, may be Kroetsch’s, and implicitly Derrida’s, parodic answer to Lacan’s privileging of the phallus. As in Derrida’s homonymic play with signifiers and Kroetsch’s “homographic” play on the possibilities of m-a-r-e, revelation — the lifting of the bale/veil — is a matter of vision.

The recourse to the cryptic signifier in these Canadian texts thus seems to illustrate the postmodern idea of immanence, that whatever there is of sacredness or transcendence is not beyond or outside, but resides paradoxically and visibly *within* language itself. To paraphrase Derrida: the postmodern transcendental signified is the signifier. As the sacred, seminal word pertains to the realm of the oral, revelation belongs to the visual. To simply describe the sacred moment in the lingua franca, whether through paraphrase, translation or metaphor, would violate the purity of the sacred. Such an operation would confuse mystery and revelation with simple sense making and would attest to its translatability, hence its secularity. The emphasis on the visual is in evidence in many American postmodern texts as well, where graphic images of various kinds abound — an example is the muted posthorn in my chosen model text, *The Crying of Lot 49*. But why the preference for the foreign languages in Canadian texts? The answer to this question brings us back to the problem of the relationship between

the postmodern and the postcolonial preoccupation with the link between language and the world.

In my introduction, I situated the discourse of colonization in Canada in a position of opposition to American culture, and I concurred with Hassan's claim that silence is the preferred recourse for the American postmodern writer, as epitomized by the inconclusive reenactment of the Pentecost at the end of Pynchon's novel. A point of comparison of the expressions taken by the discourse of colonization in North America presents itself quite naturally in the literature produced in Quebec during the same period. In spite of an obsessive preoccupation with its own cultural and linguistic alienation, it seems as if Québécois literature does not, in general, resort either to silence or to the cryptic, but rather attempts to "sacralize" its indigenous French, a strategy which often takes the form of bringing the bastardized and hybrid, yet clearly indigenous, "joual" into literature and celebrating profanity as a political weapon. In fact, the frequency of blasphemy in many Québécois texts indicates the close connection between the sacred and the profane that we have seen explicitly thematized in the novels of Cohen and Kroetsch. As we saw in the case of Jeremy Sadness, the sacred often takes expression in its inverted form; curses are as notoriously untranslatable on the level of "sense" as sacred words.

Risking a generalization, I would contend that where the American postmodern writer distrusts the transcendental potential of language, the Canadian postmodern/postcolonial writer distrusts a particular language, English — or perhaps, more accurately, American. It has been commonplace to talk about Canadian literature, and indeed other postcolonial literatures, as orphaned, and one could easily construct a family romance in which the Canadian — at least the Canadian male — writer is running from the (American) father in search of a lost mother. But it can also be argued that the linguistic homelessness of the postcolonial writer accords him or her the freedom to believe in the existence of a true mother (or father) tongue. The modern desacralization of writing in Western culture — a consequence of its proliferation (see Coward 133) — may contribute to the search for unfamiliar, hence still vital scripts and languages, but in postcolonial litera-

tures any such search gains an added political dimension. Whether conscious or unconscious, the distrust of the particular language of the colonizer, even if it is his/her only one, frees the postcolonial writer to pursue the search for a transcendent word elsewhere, while to the non-marginal postmodern writer caught in the prison-house of linguistic hegemony there is no language other than his (less often her) own.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> On the debate on postmodernism and politics, see Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*.
- <sup>2</sup> On the distinction between different types of postcolonial societies and the peculiarities of their literatures, see Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin.
- <sup>3</sup> Gobard provides a useful definition, which is implicit in my discussion, of the "sacred" word as an unparaphrasable absolute signifier whose only function is to connote sacredness. Its immunity to paraphrase guarantees its untranslatability. The English translation of Derrida's "Des Tours de Babel" uses the terms "translatable" for *traduisible* and "transferable" for *traductible*.
- <sup>4</sup> See, for example, Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin.
- <sup>5</sup> Kristeva borrows her term from Plato to designate the place of origin of a form of articulation which precedes the symbolic; that is, a place anterior to the construction of subjectivity. While distinct from and anterior to Lacan's concept of the imaginary, which is the register of the psyche related to the mirror stage, both concepts comprise that which exceeds (precedes or succeeds) the symbolic order which is that of law and the father. Both are at play in artistic expression and both are linked to the realm of desire and the mother.
- <sup>6</sup> I am indebted to Egya Sangmuah for this translation.
- <sup>7</sup> The "subversion" exemplified in Kroetsch's text is, in the final analysis, illusory. Kroetsch is, I would contend, more of a postmodernist than a postcolonialist insofar as he exerts a rigid control of his texts — the freedom granted to the word is more apparent than real. In fact, it can be argued that the object of his parodic dismantling of phallogocentrism is to institute himself — the author — as the only "transcendental signified" of his texts; to Kroetsch, as to many postmodern writers, the novel is a "godgame" (*Labyrinths of Voice* 68) with the author placing himself in the position of god. The same argument can be made for Cohen, who resurrects himself as the only voice in the final pages of his novel.
- <sup>8</sup> An interesting answer to the question is provided by Coward who claims that the oral is invariably anterior to the written in all sacred texts and that the main function of writing is to save the oral from being lost. In a comment that seems particularly applicable to *Beautiful Losers*, he points out that "when it functions as a script for oral use, the written word through the oral joins in the production of spiritual power" (132).
- <sup>9</sup> The original equation of sacred and profane has been shown by many anthropologists and literary theorists, among them Claude Lévi-Strauss, René Girard, Mircea Eliade, and George Steiner. It is also crucial to the operation of the carnivalesque.



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