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From Italian Marxism to Québécois Nationalism: Towards a Sociocritical Analysis of Michel Tremblay's Adaptation of Dario Fo's *Mistero buffo*

The theory of social discourse developed by Marc Angenot as a heuristic method for the study of literary texts is particularly well suited to the analysis of literature in translation.¹ Angenot, it is worth recalling, conceives of each text as

un *dispositif intertextuel, interdiscursif* qui reçoit, re façonne et réémet des préconstruits narratifs ou argumentatifs, des maximes doctrinaires, des images, des paradigmes éparpillés dans le *déjà-là* des discours institués avec leur division du travail symbolique, leur dissimulation de distinctions sociales, leurs "objets" particuliers et leurs fonctions. (1990, 99)

Doubly mediated texts, translations contain traces of the passage from one discursive field to another, revealing what is and what is not relevant to the target culture, drawing attention to the here-and-now of their reception. The pressure of audience expectations — the requirement of "acceptability" — makes theatrical texts especially prone to the recycling of the doxa of a given moment in history. Such texts provide a fertile terrain for sociocritical investigation, as Annie Brisset's research (1990) in this area amply demonstrates.

¹ For a definition of social discourse, see Angenot (1989, 13).

The present study focuses on Michel Tremblay's 1973 translation/ adaptation of Dario Fo's play *Mistero buffo*,² and examines its function within the context of the late 1960s and 1970s, a time when Québécois theatre was invigorating the on-going linguistic debate.³ Playwrights such as Tremblay were responsible for bringing *joual*—the working-class sociolect of East Montreal — out of the ghetto, so to speak, and onto the stage, a phenomenon that has been well documented.⁴

Linguistic Signs of Insubordination

Behind the movement to promote the literary use of *joual* lay the desire to expose the “deprived culture” (Warwick 1983, 401) of its speakers, and, in so doing, to denounce what many saw as the lamentable socioeconomic condition of a large section of Quebec's population. Similar sentiments had already been expressed in the inaugural issue of the Socialist, pro-Independence journal *Parti pris* which argued that the use of *joual* accurately reflected the state of alienation in which the Québécois found themselves (1963, 3).⁵ Writing in the same journal, the poet and theorist Gérard Godin commented that “Le bon français c'est l'avenir souhaité du Québec, mais le joual c'est son présent” (1965a, 19). On a more positive note of self-affirmation he subsequently declared that “l'utilisation raisonnée du joual” in itself constituted an act of defiance against the power of the province's “institutions anglo-saxonnes” (1965b, 58).

2 The distinction between translation and adaptation is not as clear cut as is usually assumed (see, for instance, the definitions offered by Déprats 1991, 836). For that reason, I have used the two terms interchangeably; neither is intended to indicate a greater or a lesser degree of adherence to the source text.

3 For a useful overview of the relationship between literature and society in Quebec between 1960 and 1990, see Pelletier 1990-91.

4 See, amongst others, Bélair (1973); Nardocchio (1986).

5 *Parti pris* consistently attributed the perceived economic, social and cultural deprivation of the Francophone population of Quebec to the domination of one “ethnic group” — the Anglophones — over another “ethnic group” — the Québécois — rather than attributing it to the domination of one social class — the *bourgeoisie* — over another social class — the proletariat. This particular analysis of the political situation highlights the inherent contradiction of *Parti pris*'s claim to be both left-wing and nationalist.

The element of challenge to the authority of the ruling classes underlying the use of *joual* was exploited for literary purposes as early as 1964 when Jacques Renaud's *Le Cassé* was published.⁶ But, fittingly, it was in the area of theatre that *joual*—based on everyday speech—was to have its greatest impact: the contro-versial trend for writing and performing plays in this idiom, which began in the late 1960s and continued well into the 1980s, soon established it as the language of the Québécois stage.⁷

With the theatrical works of Michel Tremblay in particular, this literary device came to epitomise an unequivocal expression of Québécois nationalism. Indeed, even critics who deplored the politicisation of the theatre, condemning what they saw as a generalised failure to judge dramatic works on their own merit, acknowledged that Tremblay's name had become synonymous with the raising of political awareness through his use of language:

tout le monde au Québec sait aujourd'hui que Tremblay, c'est nous, le joual, c'est nous, *Les Belles Sœurs*, c'est nous, que Tremblay reproduit fidèlement notre réalité et que son théâtre n'est ainsi que l'accident d'une prise de conscience collective.⁸

6 This was followed in 1965 by *Claude Jassin's* short novel *Pleure pas, Germaine*. Together, these works represent the first sustained attempts at writing in joual.

7 For a brief survey of its repercussions on Québécois literature, see Gauvin 1976.

8 Saint-Jacques continues in the same vein: "on nous a affirmé que le théâtre québécois avait à améliorer son mode d'insertion sociale afin d'avoir une action plus efficace sur le plan politique" (1974, 155).

During the 1970s the widely held view of Tremblay as the standard-bearer for “une dramaturgie *nationale* authentique” (Cotnam 1976, 367) meant that any new work by him (whether it be a play or a translation) was inevitably invested with precise ideological overtones, regardless of the subject matter, simply because it was written in *joual*. Therefore, when a writer who is as well known as Michel Tremblay translates the work of a politically engaged playwright such as Dario Fo,⁹ it seems highly probable that the “horizon of expectations” (Jauss) of the target audience will have a powerful influence on its reception (see Roy 1993). For, within what has been described as the “théâtre de dénonciation” (Cotnam 1976, 363) of the 1960s and 1970s, Tremblay’s characterisation of members of Montreal’s working class was regarded as a reliable depiction of the people he chose to represent and whose authenticity, it was claimed, was guaranteed by their speaking *joual*, “une langue-miroir, à la fois vraie et littéraire, dans laquelle se réfléchit la servitude d’un peuple” (Jacques Cellard, quoted by Michel Vais 1973).¹⁰

From its previous highly pejorative connotations as a degenerated form of French, *joual* had been promoted to the rank of a literary language and had thereby achieved a certain “recognition” or status (even if it was still not impervious to criticism from some quarters). The mere fact of transferring it to the setting of the established theatre conferred upon it a degree of dignity, irrespective of the social milieu it was identified with, and whose depiction it was inextricably linked to. Whilst *joual* continued to be viewed by many Québécois as an accurate reflection of their perceived socioeconomic inferiority, it was now regarded with a certain pride precisely because it represented “un décalque parfait de la décadence de notre culture nationale” (Godin 1965a, 18).

Popular Culture and the Proletarian Revolution

Dario Fo’s *Mistero buffo* was first performed in Italy in 1969 and remains one of his most enduring plays, enjoying both critical and popular acclaim.¹¹ It consists of a series of thematically linked monologues which, Fo tells us, are based on texts originally devised by the *giullari* or itinerant minstrels who were such familiar figures in Europe during the Middle Ages. These monologues, which occupy the bulk of the show, are followed by four scenes inspired from a medi-aeval mystery play, the *Passion of Christ*, and were performed by Fo together with his wife, the actress Franca

9 Italy’s best-known contemporary dramatist and winner of the 1997 Nobel Prize for Literature, Dario Fo (b. 1926) performs in and directs all his own plays. He began his career improvising stories and sketches in the style of the *fabulatori*, or travelling storytellers, centred around Lake Maggiore. On the political background to Fo’s work, see Valentini 1997; Behan 2001.

10 On Tremblay’s use of language in both theatre and fiction, see the special issue of *Présence Francophone* (1988).

11 By the time *Mistero buffo* was presented on Italian television in 1977, Fo had performed it live over 1,000 times to audiences totalling at least a million and a half (Mitchell 1999, 3).

Rame. The texts themselves range from dramatisations of biblical or holy legends, to poetry and songs. A descriptive, didactic commentary precedes each piece and is often intertwined with the texts themselves, providing information on their source, their political significance, and their relevance to current affairs, etc. The commentaries therefore form an integral part of the dramatic performance which they complement; they constitute what Suzanne Cowan describes as “a continuous dialectical exchange

between past and present, history and current experience, culture and politics” (1978, 12).

By presenting these pieces through the *giullari*, the multi-talented strolling players of Mediaeval Europe who used a mixture of music, mime, acrobatics and improvised narrative to satirise the clergy and the aristocracy, Fo is attempting to recover and reinstate a popular art that had flourished in Europe until the Renaissance (when the *giullari* had been drafted into the service of the nobility and had become court jesters, abandoning their traditional role entertaining ordinary people).¹² Accordingly, in *Mistero buffo* it is that blend of social satire and diversion that was made for, and by, the people¹³ which Fo is trying to re-evoke, that ability to create their own culture and to rebel, at least morally, against their tyrannical masters by using their ingenuity and their trenchant wit. Fo’s claim that the *giullari* fulfilled a subversive function in European societies during the Middle Ages is supported by historians such as Piero Camporesi (1991, 124) who describes the role of the *giullari* as that of “sconfessare e irridere la cultura ufficiale.”¹⁴

In his adaptation of *Mistero buffo*, Tremblay has excised Fo’s didactic commentaries in their entirety. This represents both a cultural loss in terms of the historical contextualisation which Fo is keen to provide, and a shift in the ideological bearing of the pieces presented, since Fo’s Marxist message is conveyed largely through his introductions and *interventi* (his actual choice of texts is less overtly political and is intended rather to highlight the strength and creativity of popular culture). The following extract from the prologue to *Mistero buffo* gives some idea of the kind of material that has been sacrificed in Tremblay’s version of the play:

12 In regarding the distinction between “high culture” and “low culture” as occurring relatively late, Fo appears to be following Gramsci: “Dopo il ‘500 cioè si rende radicale quel distacco tra intellettuali e popolo che [...] tanto significato ha avuto per la storia italiana moderna politica e culturale” (1966, 60). Gramsci, a thinker whose cultural writings exerted enormous influence on the Italian Left between the 1950s and the 1970s, is an important point of reference in Fo’s work, particularly in his approach to history.

13 It is worth recalling the explanation given by Fo at the beginning of his play: “Mistero vuol dire dunque: rappresentazione sacra; mistero buffo vuol dire: spettacolo grottesco. *Chi ha inventato il mistero buffo è stato il popolo*” (1977, 5; emphasis added).

14 There are obvious parallels to be drawn here with the numerous *movimenti di contestazione* that grew out of the strong anti-authoritarian climate of the late 1960s. On the counter-culture of the Left in Italy during this period, see Lumley 1990.

Fin dai primi secoli dopo Cristo il popolo si divertiva, e non era solo un divertimento, a muovere, a giocare, come si diceva, spettacoli in forma ironico-grottesca, proprio perché per il popolo, il teatro, specie il teatro grottesco, è sempre stato il mezzo primo d'espressione, di *comunicazione*, ma anche di *provocazione* e di *agitazione delle idee*. *Il teatro era il giornale parlato e drammatizzato del popolo*. (Fo 1977, 5; emphasis added)

Fo's ideological intent could not be clearer: in arguing that theatre is a quintessentially popular art form which also serves to disseminate knowledge, he implicitly contrasts this oral tradition with more recent "bourgeois" channels of communication such as books and newspapers. Not only can the theatre be used to impart information, it can also provide a means of "raising political consciousness," to borrow the expression of the period. Thus, from the outset, Fo establishes what he regards as the dual role of theatre, namely to entertain and to educate.

The desire to ensure that *Mistero buffo* was relevant to the target culture seems to lie behind Tremblay's decision to remove the commentaries which often refer to specific events in Italian politics and tended to be improvised and updated in performance in order to keep them topical. However, as noted earlier, the historical information which these commentaries also contain is an essential part of the performance since it provides a link between the "entertainment" proper offered by each piece and the educative role Fo casts himself in, a role which his preambles and digressions make manifest.

It is central to Fo's political and theatrical project — the two are inseparable — that he emphasise the popular origin of the texts he presents, as part of his Marxist belief in a homogeneous popular culture. This Marxist "myth" is re-interpreted by Fo who looks to pre-industrial Europe as a time when there was solidarity among peasant populations; he believes they found strength in their own peculiar brand of humour and storytelling. In Fo's schematised historical scenario, capitalism is regarded as having destroyed this source of self-dignity and cultural enrichment through which the people's struggle was expressed. According to his view, the *giullari's* subversive monologues were more or less the same everywhere in mediaeval Italy (and, by extension, in Europe and beyond). Fo is keen to show that many of the texts he has chosen existed in different regional versions: in the introduction to "La nascita del giullare," for example, he remarks that the piece which he is about to perform originated in the Orient and is known today in a Sicilian version. In addition, he cites the existence of another version composed in a dialect spoken in the area of Brescia-Cremona (Fo 1977, 71), information which he offers as "proof" of his thesis on the homogeneity of mediaeval popular culture.

This mythical representation of the Middle Ages has Marxist affinities: according to Marx, the social consciousness and culture of both the ruling and the exploited classes are largely determined by the relations of production prevailing at a given time. Since these relations were similar in Europe under feudalism, popular culture was also similar in these societies. In *Mistero buffo* Fo wishes to show that the conditions of exploitation of the *villani*, or peasants, were the same regardless of the country in question; his insistence on this point is intended to demonstrate that no conflict exists between different nationalities, only between social classes.

Denouncing the oppression of the poor by the rich provides both the impetus and the focus for much of *Mistero buffo*; the importance of the historical context in which Fo places the stories related by the *giullare* resides therefore in the parallel to be drawn between the oppression of the peasants of the Middle Ages and the proletariat of the contemporary world. As Tony Mitchell observes, summing up Fo's achievements in this play:

What Fo did in *Mistero buffo*, virtually single-handedly, was to distil the popular, comic, irreverent elements of mediaeval mystery plays and religious cycles into a political and cultural onslaught against the repressions of the Catholic Church and the landowning classes throughout history. He expressed this in the language of the Italian peasantry (and, by extension, every class of oppressed people), fuelled by the epic-didactic concepts of Brecht and Mayakovsky, and the political precepts of Mao Ze-Dong and Gramsci. (1999, 3)

Québécois Correspondences

The decision to stage such a radical, politically motivated play is not an entirely surprising one given the concerted effort on the part of Québécois writers and dramatists during the 1960s and 1970s to create a new canon, to build up a "national" literature for the nation-to-be. Indeed, it has been pointed out that the objectives pursued by Dario Fo's socially committed theatre in Italy correspond remarkably well — albeit on a fairly superficial level — to the kind of theatre that Tremblay and others were promoting in Quebec (Briset 1990, 88).

However, a close comparison of Tremblay's adaptation of *Mistero buffo* with the source text reveals a number of differences which should lead us to question to what degree this correspondence is actually borne out and to examine the precise nature of the supposed similarities. In order to be in a position to investigate these issues adequately it is essential to be acquainted with the ideological climate of the period. This prerequisite is dictated by the fact that Tremblay's early theatre drew its inspiration from Quebec's social and political situation and saw itself as a platform for change.¹⁵ It is not difficult to detect resonances in his work with the kind of social discourse that could be found in journals such as *Parti pris*. Indeed, this link was recognised at the time by critics; Michel Vaïs, writing in *Le Devoir* during the very week *Mistero buffo* opened in Montreal, described Tremblay as an "écrivain, enfant de *Parti pris*."

I shall therefore be referring to articles which appeared in this journal and which seem most representative of the views held by Tremblay's audiences. It is worth mentioning that, although *Parti pris* only achieved a relatively

¹⁵ In a 1972 interview, Tremblay declared that his aim was to raise political awareness amongst his audiences: "J'aurai fait cinq, six ans de ma vie où j'aurai dit des affaires, où j'aurai fait prendre conscience de choses à un peuple. [...] Mais j'voudrais faire peur au monde [...] J'veux qu'ils réagissent, en ayant peur, en braillant, en riant, en se disant: 'Il faut qu'ça change'" (1976, 792).

small readership and was a short-lived publication (1963-68),¹⁶ it reflected a political current whose support had grown considerably by the early 1970s: the separatist political tenets of *Parti pris* were no longer minority views in the years running up to the 1976 election of the *Parti québécois*.

Re-siting *Mistero buffo*

16 See Major (1979), Chapter II, for a discussion of the journal's ideological orientation.

Tremblay's adaptation of *Mistero buffo* was first performed at the Théâtre du Nouveau Monde in Montreal on 14 December 1973.¹⁷ Although it enjoyed a certain critical and popular success at the time, the text has never been published and is not therefore well known outside academic circles, unlike many of Tremblay's other translations.¹⁸ The literature on this play is virtually non-existent; all we have is a handful of newspaper reviews which, unfortunately, are not very helpful in contextualising the production.¹⁹ Neither *Le Devoir* nor *La Presse*, for example, comments on the political message underlying *Mistero buffo* and its significance for a Québécois audience; indeed, both treat Tremblay's version as if it were Dario Fo's play. Whilst it is not uncommon for reviewers to discuss literary works by foreign authors without mentioning the fact that the texts in question are *translations*, in the case of Tremblay's *Mistero buffo* one might have expected this to be remarked upon given the evident geographical transposition that is implied by having characters speak in *joual*. The most likely explanation for their silence is that critics had become so accustomed to watching plays performed in *joual* that there was no longer anything startling about *joual* translations *per se*; furthermore, to comment on the use of this idiom would have been to draw attention to it and, by implication, to question its very choice, whereas the general trend was towards naturalising its use as a literary language.²⁰

If the close study of a target text allows, amongst other things, an insight into the decisions that are constitutive of the translation process (Levy 1967), such a study also provides access to what Brisset (1990, 28) has aptly described as "un poste d'observation privilégié" from where one can monitor the social discourse of the receiving culture, examine its assumptions and its prejudices, its degree of openness or otherwise.

17 The publicity material produced by the Théâtre du Nouveau Monde referred to *Mistero buffo* as "traduit et adapté par Michel Tremblay," a clear indication of the confusion surrounding the precise meaning of the terms "translation" and "adaptation."

18 These include the works of authors such as Paul Zindel (*L'Effet des rayons gamma sur les vieux garçons*, 1970; *Et mademoiselle Roberge boit un peu*, 1971), Tennessee Williams (*Au pays du dragon*, 1972, *Camino Real*, 1979), Anton Checkov (*Oncle Vania*, 1983) and Edward Albee (*Qui a peur de Virginia Woolf?*, 1988). Indeed, Tremblay acquired something of the status of "traducteur lauréat" in Quebec during the 1970s and 1980s, to borrow the expression used by Brisset (1990, 50) who states: "on peut calculer qu'un tiers des pièces étrangères ayant obtenu la consécration éditoriale ont été traduites et adaptées par lui." However, many translated works remained unpublished because it was too costly, or even impossible, for Québécois publishers to obtain copyright (Brisset 1990, 41).

19 We do know, however, that Tremblay worked from a literal translation by Fulvia Bessette whose name appears on the programme. The project was commissioned by the Théâtre du Nouveau Monde (Tremblay 1996).

20 Although the theatre critic of the *Devoir* does not openly discuss the use of *joual*, he refers to it obliquely: "L'adaptateur aurait pu faire un usage plus économe de certaines facilités, de formules stéréotypées, de tics de langage qui n'ajoutent rien à la saveur de notre dialecte même quand il hennit généreusement" (Brie 1973). These remarks contain a veiled criticism of Tremblay's linguistic style rather than a challenge to what Brie appears to accept as the widespread currency of "notre dialecte."

The Birth of the *Giullare*

For the purposes of my inquiry I shall concentrate on a single scene from *Mistero buffo* in order to be able to analyse the source text and the target text in some detail; it is only through such a careful comparison that minor shifts in meaning as well as significant differences will emerge. I have chosen “La nascita del giullare” since it contains many of the principal themes of Fo’s play.

In this piece the *giullare* recounts his peasant origins. He tells how, when he was a serf, he discovered a mountain and, through sheer hard work, succeeded in cultivating it; whereupon a member of the local nobility claimed this now-fertile terrain as his own. Both the priest and the notary tried to persuade the serf to submit to the noble’s orders, but he refused to leave his land. In retribution, the feudal lord raped the serf’s wife in front of him and his children. As a result of this loss of honour, his family deserted him and, in despair, the serf tried to commit suicide. Whilst attempting to hang himself, he was interrupted by the arrival of a man who asked him for some water, a request he complied with. The man then revealed that he was Christ and proceeded to perform a miracle; he gave the serf the ability to express himself, arming him with a razor-sharp tongue with which to mock the “padroni,” those who hold the power:

Jesus Cristo a soi mi che t’vegna a ti a dat parlar. E sta lengua u la beuciarà e ’ndrà a schisciar ’me ’na lama da partùto vescighe a far sbrogare, a da’ contra i padroni, e li far schisciare parché i altri i capissa, parché i altri imprendia e parché i altri i poda rigolar. Che no è che col ridare ch’ol padron ul s’ fa sbragare, che se i ride contra i padron.... (Fo 1977, 81)²¹

Christ instructs the metamorphosed serf to spread the message of class oppression across the country, using satire to foment popular rebellion — a *mise en abime* of Fo’s own objective in performing *Mistero buffo*. This scene in particular dramatises the absence of dignity and honour which is afforded the modern proletariat. Furthermore, Fo criticises the complicity of the educated classes, or their agents — represented here by the notary, the cleric, and the soldiers who correspond to the bourgeoisie, the Church and the forces of law and order in contemporary Italian society — in bolstering feudalism and its successor, capitalism. To the power, wealth and corruption of a clergy that

21 “I am Jesus Christ. I have come to give you the power of speech. And this tongue of yours will lash, and will slash like a sword, deflating inflated balloons all over the land. You will speak out against bosses, and crush them, so that others can understand and learn, so that others can laugh at them and make fun of them, because it is only with laughter that the bosses will be destroyed” (Fo 1988, 53).

hypocritically preaches passive resignation, Fo opposes the revolutionary message of social change and equality offered by the figure of Christ.

The Language of Denunciation

The “dialetto padano” used by Fo in *Mistero buffo* is intended to be a reaction against the linguistic “normalisation” implemented by the ruling classes. As such, it constitutes a rejection of “standard Italian,” regarded as a “linguaggio elitario,” “linguaggio del potere, strumento di superiorità culturale nei confronti del popolo” (Binni 1975, 234) — a language which, Fo claims, has long been the vehicle for the promotion of a (bourgeois) culture that is alien to the people. By exploiting the vitality and resourcefulness of dialect (the hegemonic Italian of the educated classes being regarded as “flat” or dull by comparison), Fo points to the positive values that it embodies and suggests that dialect has always been a means whereby ordinary people could reappropriate language. In *Mistero buffo* he proposes an alternative, partly invented, idiom which he regards as being better suited to the transmission of an alternative, popular culture. Allied to this use of dialect is Fo’s emphasis on the popular origin of the texts which he uses in *Mistero buffo* as evidence “dell’enorme ricchezza culturale delle classi subalterne in lotta contro il potere politico, perfino nel lontano Medio Evo” (Binni 1977, 50-51). There is a parallel here with Tremblay’s use of *joual* which is also ideologically motivated: if his *joualisation* evinces a desire to rebel against the class-system, what it represents above all is a reaffirmation of Québécois nationalism.²²

22 On *joual* as a rejection of standard French, see the following comments by Godin: “L’utilisation du joual n’a jamais été avant maintenant une attitude revendicatrice et de rébellion ouverte contre les canons d’une société dont nous ne rejetons pas d’ailleurs que les coutumes littéraires. Nous parlons joual comme les Africains diplômés de la Sorbonne ont rompu un jour avec le français pour parler la langue de leur tribu ou de leur pays” (1965b, 58-59; emphasis added).

Fo's use of an imprecise, "ancient" Italian dialect, whilst it may not be quite as authentically mediaeval as he would have us believe,²³ seeks to create an archaic effect which is an important aspect of *Mistero buffo* — a feature that is absent from Tremblay's text, since his characters speak in contemporary *joual*. There is no attempt to archaïse the language of his translation in order to situate the action in a remote historical period; he could, for instance, have opened the scene with something like "Oyez! Oyez! Bonnes gens..." (Fo has "Ahh... gent... vegni chi che gh'è 'l giular," 73). Instead, his choice of wording places the action within a modern setting, despite the anachronistic presence of the *jongleur*: "Approchez, approchez, mesdames et messieurs, approchez, le jongleur est icitte!" (Tremblay 1973, 11).²⁴

Further examples of Tremblay's tendency to modernise Fo's text include his translation of "soldati" by "ses chums," and "toute sa gang de chums" (Tremblay 1973, 15), and "nobili" by "les gros" (Tremblay 1973, 16), as well as the omission of the second occurrence of the term "onore" — repeated twice in the same passage — which is presumably considered an outmoded concept (Tremblay 1973, 17).

In the light of Tremblay's decision not to employ any archaisms, it seems reasonable to assume that the key figure of the *jongleur* no longer fulfills the same role as he does in the source text where he personifies the mediaeval heritage of popular culture. Yet, contrary to expectations, Tremblay has not modernised this character by re-naming him; indeed, he appears to attach considerable importance to the very word *jongleur*, for where Fo uses it once, Tremblay (1973, 11) uses it three times in the opening passage, and also adds, for good measure, "j'jingle." Given the fact that the verb *jongler* is commonly used in *joual* to mean "to ponder, to be concerned about something, to hesitate," it might not be too far-fetched to see Tremblay's emphasis on this character as an indication that he wished to exploit the polysemy of the terms "jongler" and "jongleur" to present, allegorically, the figure of Quebec perpetually hesitating between its schizophrenic allegiance to provincial and federal government (it is constantly forced to "juggle" both) and pondering with anguish over its uncertain future.

Translating Oppression

Although Tremblay has chosen to retain many of the major themes that run through *Mistero buffo*, these inevitably take on a rather different meaning because of the different context of reception. Fo's play deals with issues that would have been very familiar to Italian audiences (whether or not they were left-wing) at the time since they formed part of

23 For a philological discussion of Fo's text, see Binni (1977 51, 57).

24 Contrary to conventional practice when referring to translations, the entry for Tremblay's is listed under his, rather than Fo's, name.

Mistero buffo in Works Cited is

current political debate — issues derived largely from Marx's ideas concerning the exploitation of the proletariat in capitalist societies, a subject that, as we saw earlier, Fo presents by analogy with the condition of the mediaeval serf whom he shows to be constantly at the mercy of the aristocracy. The peasants are honest and industrious, with a capacity for compassion, whilst the nobles are depicted as being greedy for gain, and prepared to use any means, however ruthless, to preserve their position as overlords.

In "La nascita del giullare," the anachronistic term "padron" is employed by the serf to describe the noble who forces him off his land, thereby leaving the audience in no doubt as to the topicality of this scene. For the word *padrone* expressed a key concept in the language of the Italian trade unions during the 1960s and 1970s, and was used pejoratively to refer to factory owners and heads of industry (although it also targeted the *class* of employers in general). In "La naissance du jongleur" Fo's "padron" is rendered variously by "gros écœurants" (Tremblay 1973, 16), "grand boss" (Tremblay 1973, 17), "maître" (Tremblay 1973, 18), "gros boss" (Tremblay 1973, 19) and "le grand boss pis sa gang de pas-bons" (Tremblay 1973, 20). Here the reference is no longer to the capitalist exploiter but rather to the *imperialist* exploiter; in the context of Quebec the term *boss* has always had strong associations with a specific "ethnic group," the Anglophone population, portrayed as dominant:

A regarder le Québec, on découvre rapidement les grandes lignes de sa situation: que la grande majorité de sa population est formée par un groupe national différent du reste de l'Amérique du Nord; que, économiquement le Québec est défavorisé par rapport au reste de l'Amérique du Nord, et la majorité française par rapport à sa minorité anglo-saxonne [...] et que l'économie y est nettement contrôlée par la minorité anglo-saxonne. (*Parti pris* 1965, 4)

The same semantic conversion operates consistently. For instance, in the sentence "j'm'en vas vous faire rire en me moquant des gros, des grands de ce monde-citte, des puissants, pis des hauts placés" (Tremblay 1973, 11), Tremblay has employed four terms to translate the single term "alt" (Fo 1977, 73), an allusion both to the mediaeval nobility and to contemporary capitalists. He precedes the word "puissants" by two epithets which have a peculiar resonance in Québécois popular speech (*gros* and *grands* occur frequently in the social discourse of the time). These words, repeated in variant forms, become veritable isotopies in Tremblay's text, all referring to the theme of "the exploiter," now extended to that of "the colonial exploiter," easily identifiable as a "foreigner" established on the soil of the exploited "majorité française":

L'aliénation dont nous souffrons, et qui existe à tous les niveaux, vient de ce que nous sommes *colonisés et exploités* [...] — au niveau économique, la presque totalité

de nos richesses naturelles et de notre industrie est dans les mains d'*étrangers* — canadiens ou américains. (*Parti pris* 1963, 3)²⁵

What further ensures that the words “boss,” “gros” and “grands” acquire the connotations described above are the references to a topography which seems to lend itself perfectly to that of Montreal. These references exist already in the source text but the new context alters their denotation. Most strikingly, perhaps, is the presence of the word “montagne”: although it is a literal translation of Fo’s “montagna,” it assumes a symbolic value in the target culture where it is associated automatically with the sole mountain that exists in the Montreal area, the so-called “Mont Royal” which the city’s inhabitants commonly refer to as “la montagne.” Furthermore, in Tremblay’s text the word “montagne” can be interpreted as a metonymical allusion to Montreal itself.

The other topographical elements are “vallée” and “fleuve”; here some small but crucial, adjustments have been introduced to reinforce the relevance of these terms to a Québécois audience. Where Fo uses a plural noun (“queste valli”), Tremblay uses the singular (“la vallée”);²⁶ this deliberate translational shift from the general to the specific suggests that a reference to the St. Lawrence Valley is highly plausible. In the case of the word “fleuve,” already present in the source text (“fiume”), it is striking to see how well this matches the geography of Montreal; in connection with “montagne” and “vallée” which one is led to identify with Montreal through a number of precise textual indications, “fleuve” can be readily associated with the fleuve Saint-Laurent.

The Discourse of Dis-Possession

The themes of land ownership and appropriation in Fo’s *Mistero buffo* plainly have Marxist overtones. The nationalist connotations which these concepts evoke in the Québécois setting are equally obvious. It is interesting to note how, often by effecting only very slight changes, Tremblay has succeeded in assimilating the source text context to the desired target text setting. The shift from “questa terra” to “ta terre” (Tremblay 1973, 15), which elsewhere is translated by “tu-seul avec ma terre” (Tremblay 1973, 17), is achieved by transforming the deictic “questa” into the possessive articles “ta” and “ma,” two deictics which convey a very different meaning from the Italian demonstrative article. The insistence on possession, reinforced by Tremblay’s addition “tu-seul,” is of self-evident political significance for a people who suffer from a sense of dispossession.

25 On the “occupation” of Quebec, see for example Piottte 1971.

26 “le patron, le grand boss de toute la vallée” (Tremblay 1973, 14).

The serf's satisfaction at the fruits of his labour on the land leads him to announce: "U l'era tera nostra!"²⁷ (Fo 1977, 75). This declaration of his attachment to the land (the land belongs to the peasants, and hence to the people) is distorted in translation: "C'tait notre terre à nous autres!" (Tremblay 1973, 14). Tremblay has added an indication of *québécois* that not only situates the target text firmly on "home territory" for his audience by employing a specifically Québécois linguistic mannerism ("à nous autres"), but actually places a barrier between "nous autres" and the outside world. There is thus an implicit rejection of alterity: the corollary of the assertion "à nous autres" is "the land belongs to us *and not to anyone else*." In the Québécois context, this division between *nous autres* and *les autres* can be interpreted far more readily as the division between two "ethnic groups" rather than between two social groups (as is the case in Fo's text, where the possessive article "nostra" indicates the notion of belonging, of class solidarity among the workers); in the semantic chain built up by Tremblay through precisely this kind of detail, *les autres* represent the Anglophone rulers who have taken political possession of the territory which they control as a colony.²⁸ "C'tait notre terre à nous autres!" harks back to a mythical, pre-Conquest age when the Québécois had their own territory, an Edenic past to be recovered. What this representation fails to account for is the fact that the Québécois were colonisers themselves, displacing from *their* territory the indigenous peoples; the latter are signally absent from the social discourse of the 1960s and 1970s (most notably in Vallières 1968).

Several other changes and interpolations contribute to emphasising this particular theme. Tremblay has replaced the peasant's protestation "no no" (in response to the notary who is trying to persuade him to relinquish his land to the "padron") by "J'reste chez nous" (Tremblay 1973, 15). A few lines earlier, we find the expression "Chus mon propre maître" which, together with "chez nous," echoes the famous 1960 electoral slogan of Jean Lesage's Liberal Party, "Maîtres chez nous." Tremblay's decision to insert "c'tait chez nous" (1973, 16) can also be related to the same nationalist sentiment. Another well-known political slogan ("c'est le temps que ça change") seems to be expressed in the final words of this scene, words which have been added to the target text: "Le temps est arrivé! Le temps est arrivé de parler! Enfin, le temps de parler est arrivé!" (Tremblay 1973, 20). The need to denounce the injustice of their socioeconomic and political situation — to "speak out" — was a constant theme in Québécois theatre following the Quiet Revolution. Allied to this was the importance of creating the consciousness of a national identity, a notion that is contained in a more recent slogan: "On est 6 millions. Faut s'parler."

27 "It was our land" (Fo 1988, 49).

28 For a detailed analysis of the *topos* of colonisation in Québécois discourse during this period, and its textual manifestation in Tremblay's *Mistère buffo*, see Dunnett 1997.

Whilst such additions are remarkable for their resonance with the Québécois social discourse of the period, one cannot help but be struck by a number of key elements in the source text which correspond, albeit superficially, to the target culture so that Tremblay has not needed to alter them in any way. Thus, the denunciation in Fo's *Mistero buffo* of an educated elite (the priest and the notary) who collaborated with the feudal ruling class in its oppression of the peasants is mirrored in Quebec where, according to the nationalist view, there was an "élite clérico-bourgeoise" who supported the Anglophone ruling class. The intervention, first of the priest, and then of the notary, to enjoin the peasant to respect the will of the "boss" (Fo's "padron") can be interpreted as reflecting a nationalist reading of history: according to the analysis given by *Parti pris*, for instance, one of the causes of "l'échec de la rébellion [de 1837-38] est sans contredit l'attitude qu'a prise le clergé" (Dionne 1964, 12).²⁹

The Discourse of Demystification

29 There is a correspondence between the stranglehold of the clergy in Quebec until the Quiet Revolution and the position of authority which the Catholic Church held in Italy during the same period, even if their respective roles cannot be considered as equivalent. A major difference was that education had long been secular in Italy; this undoubtedly facilitated the spread of Marxist thought in many Italian schools from about 1968 until the early 1980s, and, to a lesser degree, throughout that decade, despite the so-called *riflusso*.

The theme of language is an important one in the works of Dario Fo, and is presented as a means of empowerment for the working classes, a notion summed up in the title of his 1969 play, *L'operaio conosce trecento parole, il padrone mille: per questo lui è il padrone*. Linguistic mastery is at the heart of *Mistero buffo* where the *giullare* uses his tongue to mock the rich; satire is thus presented as the instrument of demystification *par excellence*, through which one can unmask and ultimately bring down the powers-that-be, after demonstrating that their prestige rests on nothing more than “hot air” — inflated words and illusory arguments.³⁰ The *giullare* therefore has a key role to play in the revolutionary struggle, and this is a role which Fo clearly reserves for himself as he sets about raising political consciousnesses. Here is yet another feature of the source text which is germane to the Québécois context, as a survey of the prevailing social discourse reveals. The first issue of *Parti pris*, for example, explicitly voices this desire to challenge the (Anglophone) hegemony by exposing what it regards as the falsehoods on which it is founded:

Par rapport aux structures aliénantes qu'il s'agit de détruire, cette revue est une entreprise de demystification; nous tenterons de démonter les mythes et les idéologies qui cachent la violence qu'on nous fait. (*Parti pris* 1963, 3)

In *Mistero buffo*, Jesus is presented as the sort of “proto-Marxist” whose views have been misrepresented by the official Church; his defence of the poor and the oppressed using the language of the people is clearly intended to demystify the rhetoric of the ecclesiastical establishment. It is Christ who endows the peasant with a linguistic gift in order to enable him to assume his role as *giullare*. Whereas the priest preaches resignation and submission to the established order, Christ offers a revolutionary (Marxist) message:³¹

No star li atchi in sù la tera, vai d'intorna e a quei che te tira pìere, ti parla e dighe, faig' comprendèr, e fai de manera che sta vesciga sgunfiada ca l'è ol to padron, ti sbùsa cun la tua lengua e fa' andar feura l'acqua [...]. Ti devi schisciare sti padrun

30 See Fo: “Giular ca son mi... che fa i salt e ca l tràmula e che... oh... oh... a u fai rider, ca foi coi alt e fai vedar com’a sont groli e grossi i balon che vai d’intorna a far guere son sfigurat, o trai via el pileo e... pffs... soi sengobrà” (1977, 73). “I am the jongleur. I leap and pirouette, and make you laugh. I make fun of those in power, and I show you how puffed up and conceited are the bigshots who go around making wars in which we are the ones who get slaughtered. I reveal them for what they are. I pull out the plug, and... pssss... they deflate” (1988, 48).

31 Indeed, throughout the play Christ is shown speaking out in defence of the poor (in marked contrast to the reactionary clerics who side with the ruling classes): the emphasis on the revolutionary nature of Christ’s teachings is part of Fo’s recovery of a “truth” that he regards as having been obfuscated by the hegemonic discourse of the elite.

[sic], e i previti e tûti quei che va intorna, i nodari, i avogador, quei che va d'intorna. (Fo 1977, 81)³²

In the same way, *joual* can be seen as having a “revolutionary” impact on Québécois society since it is used to denounce the historical injustices which the Francophone population feel they have suffered. The fact that it does so by employing an impoverished but direct language merely serves to reinforce the gulf that separates its speakers from the ruling classes who hide behind circumlocution and bombast. This linguistic ideology is connected with the notion that the time had come to speak out against oppression and alienation — a recurrent notion in contemporary social discourse and one that was expressed by many writers engaged in the struggle to “liberate” Quebec. In an interview which he gave in 1972 Tremblay suggested that the Québécois had reached a turning point in their history:

Quand t'es dans un pays comme ici, c'est merveilleux parce que justement on était complètement pognés, pis depuis quatre, cinq ans, tu peux enfin dire des affaires. C'est un terrain presque vierge! *On est un peuple qui s'est jamais parlé pis là on s'parle.* (Tremblay 1976, 790; emphasis added.)³³

Conclusion

The examples given in this comparative study of “La nascita del giullare” and “La naissance du jongleur” are indicative of the kinds of ideological shift operated by one writer-translator (Tremblay) in a given culture (the Québécois one) at a given time in its social and literary history (the decade following the Quiet Revolution). What is perhaps most striking is how, by applying the Marxist matrix of Fo’s play to a different context of reception, it has been possible to

32 “You shouldn’t remain here stuck to your land. You should move around the country, and when people throw stones at you, you should tell them, and help them to understand, and deflate that great bladder of a landlord. [...] You must crush these nobles, these priests, and all those who surround them: notaries, lawyers, etc” (Fo 1988, 53).

33 Another analogy that can be drawn with the source culture of *Mistero buffo* is that Quebec was entering a revolutionary phase in 1960 which coincides, more or less, with a period of great social change in Italy.

produce such a radically different text whilst only making apparently minor changes.³⁴

Yet these changes are all the more significant since the bulk of the Marxist message conveyed by Fo is to be found in the commentaries which are intermingled with the narration proper; as has already been pointed out, this didactic dimension is lacking from the target text because Tremblay has omitted all the introductory explanations. Inevitably, such substantial cuts cause textual repercussions at all levels, regardless of the actual changes effected in the text itself — changes which are sometimes so minute they would pass by unnoticed in performance. Yet, these modifications are often the most telling, as is illustrated by Tremblay's substitution of a possessive adjective for a demonstrative adjective, a substitution which transforms Fo's vision of shared ownership into a territorial claim. It is precisely because they are almost imperceptible that subtle shifts are able to insinuate themselves into the target text; these microstructural modifications have a radical impact on the macrostructure of the play, generating different ideologemes (Angenot 1977) from those contained in the source text.

Thus, in Tremblay's *Mistero buffo*, the ideologeme embodying the notion of the exploitation of the proletariat has been converted into an ideologeme concerning the exploitation of the Québécois, a remarkable transformation if one considers the strong imprint that Fo's text bears, an imprint one might have expected to be difficult to erase. And, indeed, if one looks closely at Tremblay's version, it becomes clear that, paradoxically, much of the "original message" is still there, latent, so to speak. Ultimately, however, it is a virtual message since the conditions required to realise it — that is to say, to receive it — are absent.

34 Or rather, in Tremblay's adaptation the Marxist matrix has not been preserved in its integrity, but applied selectively and deliberately — there is nothing random about the translational transmutations detected in the *joual* text — where it was deemed most appropriate and most effective.

Instead, in this particular culture of reception, with its "préoccupation identitaire" (Brisset 1990, 312), all the necessary conditions obtain so as to ensure a reading of this text which differs fundamentally from that yielded by Fo's play: Tremblay's *Mistero buffo* effectively turns Fo's universalising Marxist message on its head and replaces it with a particularising nationalist message. The strong impulse to appropriate the Other and to assimilate difference that has been observed in Québécois theatre and, by extension, in Québécois society of the 1970s would suggest that only this nationalist interpretation of Tremblay's adaptation would have been possible in the universe of discourse of the early 1970s. The discursive assumptions upon which translation (like any other instance of social discourse) rests, determine that it fulfill a "fonction doxologique" (Brisset 1990, 312). In the case of Tremblay's "joulised" *Mistero buffo*, we have seen how translation can become a vehicle for separatist aspirations.³⁵

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