The Braaultian Path to the Other: Estrangement and Nontranslation

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A Vignette of Brault’s Leitmotifs
Jacques Brault is a Quebec author born in 1933; his body of work, covering a variety of literary genres – essays, poetry and literary translation – has been awarded a number of distinguished prizes, including three Governor-General Awards, the most prestigious cultural awards in Canada. Brault’s work is relevant to the problem of intersubjectivity in that his writing is constantly redefined by openly engaging in a dialogue with the other, a practice which shifts the boundaries of the genres in which he works. Brault’s originality also lies in his positioning at the threshold between self and other, between genres, between original text and translation.

In my discussion of Brault’s poetics of liminality, I will focus on three notions dear to Brault: that of the pathway, where occurs the meeting between self and other; that of the estrangement, whereby the self must first become alienated to itself, that is, other, in order to continue on the pathway to a renewed self, and that of the (non)translation, a practice in which the two former notions meet to redefine translation at the threshold between self and other.

The Other on the Pathway
Brault’s entire body of work, which spans from the 1960s to the present, is spurred by the tension resulting from writing between two poles: that of the transitivity towards the other, to which his vocative texts point, and that of the usual intransitivity of literature. “But how is one not to write to someone?” (Melançon 202), asks Brault, commenting on the inevitability of the vocative aspect of his work. The need for the other subject is made blatant in the form and content of Brault’s texts: formally, by the frequent usage of second person pronouns (nous, tu) – amongst various other
“enunciative strategies (play on pronouns, dialogues, exclamations, interrogations)” (Melançon 202) – as well as by the omnipresent, although diffuse, intertextuality. Nevertheless, a very tangible tension remains between transitivity and intransitivity, for Brault’s texts emphasize intransitivity in the very midst of their vocative style.

His texts’ oscillation between transitivity and intransitivity reflects the tension between the self and the other, which spurs all of his work and makes it so unmistakable. Brault’s texts reveal a thought where the self, through the mediation of the other, is freed from the tyranny of the I “to summarize and open all other pronouns,” as Gilles Marcotte appealingly puts it (247).

I would like to concentrate on this tension between the dual aspect of Brault’s texts by using Jessica Benjamin’s work on intersubjectivity, as Brault’s writings point to the discovery of a liminal space “in which it is possible for either subject to recognize the difference of the other” (Benjamin 1998: xii). This liminal space is considered by Benjamin as a threshold, a third space belonging neither to the self nor to the other. What is specific to Brault is that the liminal space he envisions takes the shape of a “path” (or “way”, for lack of a better translation of “chemin” in English), a moving space where the self meets the other, because the self and the other do not have fixed identities but are always on the move. The usual translation would be road. But a road is usually well-traveled and leads somewhere. A path is not so clearly delineated, and perhaps less predictable. The Oxford English Dictionary defines path as “the course or direction in which a person or thing is moving,” putting the emphasis not on the pathway but on the highly individual course of a person, which corresponds to Brault’s idea of a chemin.

In an interview, Brault himself illustrates this conception of the self as progressing with the other: “I am so little interested in myself. One could say I forget myself on the way. What rallies me is that there dwells within me the face of the other” (Melançon 206, emphasis added). The intermingling of the concepts of the pathway and the other are particularly relevant in that, according to Alain Massé, for Brault, “the threats encountered by the subject on his path are petrification and disintegration, both resulting from an absence of opening to the other,” and that “this Other is not a threat but a foundation” (i; vi, my translation). This indicates how redemptive the figure of the other is in Brault’s work. Frédérique Bernier maintains that Brault’s essays, which he himself calls accompaniments, bring the reader to discover the “paradoxical and demanding laws of hospitality, which shatter the notions of origin and textual ownership” (23, my translation). We will later see how this particular positioning leads to nontranslation.

The necessary course towards the other can be found not only in Brault’s essays, where he addresses the reader like a confidant, but also in his poetry, which is frankly dialogic in its tension towards the other. “I looked for you, knowing that I am nothing / nobody without you / and that you don’t exist without my gestures” (Brault 1975a: 40). For Brault, the other, infinitely desirable, remains other while nonetheless sharing