

ELISABETH A. TUTSCHEK

Canadian Literature of the New Millennium: An Interview with *entre-genre* Writer Nathalie Stephens

For decades now, Canada has been trying to emancipate from stereotypes of Canadianness like the urban and the rural, open spaces, and *le Grand Nord* to brand itself anew and according to the nation's contemporary agendas: multiculturalism and bilingualism. The following interview will introduce the reader to a young writer that deals with one of the aspects of the new Canadian profile: the problematic of bilingualism and, consequently, translation.

Canada is a constitutionally bilingual nation, but what about its bilingual writers and translators? Poet and translator Nathalie Stephens deals with the struggles of being between two languages, two nations in fact, and two different histories – being between English Canada and Québec. Born in Montréal as the child of an English father and a French mother, Stephens grew up in Toronto, studied in Lyon, and has finally chosen to live and write in the United States. Her literature, however, continues to deal with bilingualism and her creative translations challenge the dichotomies of Canada. The specific interest in language and cognitive categorisations has led Stephens to question more than the borders between nations and linguistic systems. Inspired by feminist and queer movements, Stephens comes to terms with the blurring of sex, gender, and sexuality categories. Her agenda is to break with traditions, de-construct discursive power matrices, and search the space of the in-between. This also holds true when it comes to genre. Defining herself as an *entre-genre* writer, Stephens neither publishes novels nor poem collections. Her writing does not conform to categorisations like 'prose' or 'poetry' and her texts cannot be understood as a manifestation of queer writing either, because the writing agenda is precisely to stay out of pre-defined categories. Neither can her self-translations be read as reproductions of one and the same text in English or French. They are rewritings that explore the in-between space of difference between language systems that Stephens inhabits as a writer that is neither Anglo-Québécois nor Franco-Ontarian, neither Canadian nor Québécois. Stephens stays out of those categories as much as her narrators do when they blur the storyline with transformativity and code-switching.

Living and writing in Chicago, Nathalie Stephens currently teaches Visual and Critical Studies at the School of the Art Institute. Stephens has translated amongst

others Catherine Mavrikakis, Gail Scott, John Keene, and Édouard Glissant; she published her first text *hivernale* in 1995, which was followed by *This Imagined Permanence* (1996) and *Colette m'entends-tu?* (1997). With her fourth text *Underground* (1999), she was finalist of the "Grand Prix du Salon du livre de Toronto" in 2000. While her early writings bear the influences of French feminism – Andrew Zawacki refers to Stephens as "the son-daughter of Cixous and Genet"¹ – her later texts come to terms with the performativity of sex and gender categories as well as the linguistic systems that constrain them to binaries. Stephens has published numerous texts since *Je Nathanaël* appeared in French in 2003 and, under the same title, in English in 2006. *The Sorrow and the Fast of It*, following *Je Nathanaël*, came out in 2007; its French version ... *s'arrête? Je* (2007) received the "Prix Alain-Grandbois de l'Académie des lettres du Québec 2008" – a prize in the category of poetry.

The following interview took place in Canada in early December 2008, when we had the opportunity to meet and talk about the concepts of 'poetry' and 'genre', translation and trans-gender, and, in particular, the books *The Sorrow and the Fast of It* and ... *s'arrête? Je*.

"This is as we discover the structure and the structure chokes us into tight squares of paralysis. What I mean to say is the significance of gravity is lost to the body in among this many constructions" (Stephens 2007, 72).

The Sorrow and the Fast of It (2007) can be read as the suite to *Je Nathanaël* (2003; 2006). Initially an homage to André Gide's *The Fruits of the Earth*², the earlier text is an answer to the imaginary lover Gide addresses in his text. Stephens takes up the character of Nathanaël in her writing and gives him a body. Once created, however, this body is contested in *The Sorrow and the Fast of It*: Nathanaël reoccurs in the figure of the two-fold narrator Nathalie/Nathanaël that emerges from a fragmented utopian city. This place bears the geographies of various locations all over the world: Guelph (Ontario), Norwich (United Kingdom), Lyon and Paris (France), Barcelona (Spain), Ljubljana (Slovenia), New York and Chicago – to name just a few building blocks of Stephens' blended metropolis. The first-person narrator restlessly wanders the urban spaces in-between in search of an identity beyond traditionally conceptualized binary categorizations. Stephens thereby blurs the boundaries between sex and gender, male/female and masculine/feminine on the content level and supports this effect of deconstructing taxonomies on the narrative level – the no-

1 <http://asu.edu/pipercenter/how2journal/vol_3_no_2/alerts/zawacki.html>, Dec 6, 2009.

2 Cf. André Gide's *Les nourritures terrestres* (1897), from which Nathalie Stephens not only takes up the character of Nathanaël on the content level, but also the idea of blurring genre on the formal level.

tions of author and narrator become indistinct – as well as on the formal level by moving between prose and poetry, creating an *entre-genre* narrative.³

While Stephens's writing lately has become of interest for English, French, and Feminist/Gender/Queer Studies in Canada and the U.S., her texts have not yet entered literature classrooms of English and French programs or Gender Studies and Queer Theory in Europe. This contribution would like to overcome that trans-Atlantic lag by portraying the author in conversation. The following interview offers insights to Stephens' understanding of categories, labels, and the notion of institution – systems of order Stephens continuously seeks to do away with. As shown above, *The Sorrow and the Fast of It* might serve as a representative example of Stephens' writing technique, hence there is a focus on this text during the interview.

“Je Nathalie, Je Nathanaël”: An interview

Elisabeth Tutschek: Is poetry a sign of or is it an instrument of power? (cf. *Notre Musique* by Jean-Luc Godard, 2004)⁴

Nathalie Stephens: My thinking about poetry has changed a lot over time. Clearly, when I began writing, I wrote what I called poetry and I must have been amenable to that distinction. Now I have reservations about this particular framework. I do not know what it means to say 'I am a poet'; there is something almost uncomfortable about that claim. I have distanced myself from that particular category while, at the same time, I recognise that that is the space in which my work is most readily received. However, I have some very strong critiques about [literary] genre in general. "Aléa", an essay published in *At Alberta* (2008), was commissioned for a book on the long poem and I started writing it and then I realised I cannot do this. I resist that particular reading of my work. I think the economy of poetry does grant itself a certain amount of power and there is an attitude that seems to go along with 'poetry', which I find utterly distasteful. I have always been interested in poetry as it opens on to philosophical questions and certainly philosophy functions as an instrument of power. It is imbued with a tremendous amount of power – the way it is constructed and addressed involves enormous power struggle: a new philosopher comes along and dismantles [theories] in order to found a new philosophy on the ruins of the old one, moving everything aside and then imposing the new authority. I find that discourse around poetry often functions that way and I am deeply troubled by that. An exceptional text exceeds the boundaries of the genre that would

3 Parts of this are taken from the article: Tutschek, Elisabeth, 2009, "Nathalie and Nathanaël: Queering urban space in Nathalie Stephens' *The Sorrow and The Fast of It*", in: Best of Nachwuchsforum of the GKS, 2009 (forthcoming).

4 Stephens mentions *Notre Musique* in another interview (cf. <<http://12or20questions.blogspot.com/2007/10/12-or-20-questions-with-nathalie.html>>, Dec 6, 2009)

be attributed to it such that it becomes simply a work that I am excited to encounter and in fact I am least interested of all in what it calls itself. You have made a space and claimed it and named it, but I distrust even my own impulses. I am not comfortable with the things that I am doing and once I have done them I want immediately to question them again and dismantle them. I am not looking for a comfortable place; I am not looking for somewhere to settle. I do not wish for language to function as a dwelling. I want to be crossing over always into these spaces that are extremely combative or disarming, disorienting or displacing. That is where I find them particularly productive; or maybe this space gets drained out of a particular content rather than filled.

ET: Could your writing be compared to what was labelled 'fiction theory' in Nicole Brossard's⁵ generation? Do you want your work to have political impact?

NS: I guess the simple answer would be no, I do not see my work in that way. I do not situate myself in a lineage; perhaps actively I *unsituate* myself. It is also true that I came across Brossard's writings fairly late. I would say that existentialism probably had a far greater impact on me than anything else in terms of formative readings. I have introduced this term *entre-genre*, which for me is different than *cross-genre*. I would certainly like for it to be considered in relation to my own work rather than having [my writing] inserted in other pre-existing categories. There is a resistance as well with regard to poetry; *The Sorrow and the Fast of It* is sometimes referred to as *poems*, [while] it is not actually *poems*, but it is a book. [A book] does something very different than *poems* do.

ET: Do you see a reciprocal relation between the subject and the city in *The Sorrow and the Fast of It* (2007) – such as the subject constructs the city while it is constructed by it in turn?

NS: The body anticipates the city as it enters into the city and the city comes into being with the body. I might describe my work as a work of distances – at times distances can be very small and there are multiple ways in which one crosses distances. There are all these historical displacements as well, in terms of Benjaminian discussions on the concept of history, for example, and [in terms of] his notion of 'messianic time' and the way shards of other moments erupt into the present. The city also contains that – as language does – and the body is not just my body, but there are the other bodies. They may be absent, they may be spectral or cadaverous, but they also affected the construction of the city. The term that I come back to again and again is this notion of correspondence, because the idea of distance is contained in that of reach, of touch, of desire, movement, and proximity. I mean there is closeness in the latter, there is breath, there is ink, there is paper; there are all the elements of writing and of the other that address another reciprocity.

5 Nicole Brossard is Québec's most famous feminist and one of the most prolific feminist writers of Canada. She is the author of e.g. *French Kiss* (1974) and *Le Desert Mauve* (1987).

ET: Why did you choose to use a gender-marked language system for the construction of a body beyond gender categories (in your work in general and in *The Sorrow and the Fast of It* in particular) instead of opting for other linguistic interventions (as, for instance, Ursula K. Le Guin does in *The Left Hand of Darkness*⁶)? What made you slip into the binary, or better, search the space in-between the binary?

NS: I hope that it does not stay in the binary, because this work exists among other works and the way I think of Nathalie and Nathanaël is that they are not opposite of one another the way a binary is. One is not the sort of negation of the other or the antithesis of the other. Nathanaël [phonemically] folds out of Nathalie. They share five letters, so there is this doubling that occurs, there is [an] overlap or layering. I do not see them as distinct, separate, and different, but really as unfolding. Nathanaël folds out of Nathalie. In that respect, I do not think either of them actually occupy fixed points on a line, because their relationship to one another is always shifting. Some of the difficulty that I have with my own thinking about gender and language is around the emphasis on the substantive and the pronoun. Especially in English when we think of *ungendering* language or making language gender neutral, we go immediately to the pronoun. I want for it to be more diffuse than that. I think that gender functions at different levels of the sentence and syntactical relationships actually serve also to entrench and reinforce gender binaries. The way I would put it maybe a little provocatively would be that syntax is totalitarian. It imposes a particular structure of thought and the reflexes generated by language then also generate language in a particular fashion. This gets complicated when I am working with two languages, because the way in which gender functions in French is very different to the way it functions in English. The strategies that need to be deployed in each instance are not always the same. [In] *The Sorrow and the Fast of It*, the work of gender does not only happen at [that] level and it is not just gender – I mean, the wonderful thing about *genre* in French is that it includes *gender* and *genre*. They both occupy the same semantic space, which is not the case in English; and French has introduced this word ‘gender’ to talk about specific Gender Studies.

ET: In how far do you read Hélène Cixous as non-essentialist? Where do you see the difference between ‘*écriture féminine*’ and ‘*écriture au féminin*’ and, ultimately, where would you situate your own writing?

NS: There is the distinction in English: *féminin* means female and feminine. In French *féminin* has both of these meanings. In English a big distinction is made between the two of them: I would feel comfortable using the word ‘female’, much more comfortable than I would be using the word ‘feminine’. The notion of ‘feminisation’ – I made that part of my project for a really long time, to ‘feminise’ the French language – I resist that utterly now. I’m quite uninterested in that as a project actu-

6 Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) is one of the first examples of feminist experimentation with gender and language.

ally and it seems to exhaust itself at some point. What is wonderful about translation as a mode of thought is that it allows one to approach these particular questions a little more obliquely. If I address the question of gender, I address it through discourses about translation. I find that a lot more interesting than discussions of gender that get very attached to bodies and body parts. There are a certain number of possible connotations: the notion of 'desire' [i.e.] which, I think, is very tied to all of this. I do not see my work functioning as an '*écriture au féminin*'. That language is already there and there is space for it. Maybe other considerations of gender might get read through that, but I'm not sure the relationship is so immediately obvious to me. I would say that I am very influenced by feminist thought, [but] if I were to say my work is feminist that is not a claim that I would make, I would not attach this label to it. I like 'trans' for its sort of gesturing towards translation, transmutations, [and] transgenerating. I mean my question is: once you are opening up the category of gender and rejecting fixity in gender, why attach to it 'feminine'? Why should my work be read as an '*écriture au féminin*', when I am gesturing toward versions of masculinity, when I am transgenerating the body in the work through language's possible hermaphroditisms?

ET: Which of the Montréal writers had the greatest impact on you?

NS: I am utterly excited by Catherine Mavrikakis' work, whom I translated and whom I will translate again. There is an energy to her work which attaches to a voracious emotion in me which I have some difficulty accessing in language as she does.

ET: What is your mother tongue?

NS: I have no mother tongue really; this is such an impossible question. The narrative of my languages is: my mother speaks French, my father speaks English. The mother's tongue is French, the "first" language is French, but the language of the home was English. I sometimes speak English with a French accent and there is no reason for it; sometimes my French is seamless, sometimes it is riddled with hesitation and mistakes. It seems utterly connected to states of mind and it is really emotionally determined. So I would say, really, that I do not have a mother tongue. My work ends up getting instrumentalised by other people's agendas: for one scholar I am French, for another I am an Anglophone who has chosen to write in my "second" language; I am supposedly Québécoise, even though I spent most of my childhood in Toronto and Lyon. I was born in Montréal, so I am an Anglo-Québécois for some people...

The interview above was set the morning after the book launch of *At Alberta* in Toronto on Dec 4, 2008; amongst Nathalie Stephens' most recent publications are also *Absence Where As (Claude Cahun and the Unopened Book)* (2009) as well as *Carnet de désaccords* (2009), which was finalist for the "Prix Spirale-Éva-le-Grand 2009".