

THE QUESTION OF TRANSLATION IN FLEUR JAEGGY: PERSPECTIVES FROM HUSTON AND KUNDERA

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“Il mio tedesco è fatto di lacune.”

—Fleur Jaeggy, “La mia lingua perduta” (131)

Dylan Byron’s *New Yorker* interview with the Swiss author and longtime resident of Milan, Fleur Jaeggy, opens with this brief biographical summary: “Born to a Swiss family in Zürich, in 1940, Fleur Jaeggy grew up speaking German, French, and Italian.”¹ But in the interview itself Jaeggy offers some interesting hedging in terms of which of these she speaks most comfortably. When Byron asks “Does your language have a homeland? Does it allow a return?” she stumbles a bit, before finally saying, “Fundamentally, it was Swiss German [...] But I consider my language to be Italian. It was my maternal language. And then I was in Rome. I always spoke Italian.” This echoes what she had written in the “testo inedito” that was published as an appendix to Raffella Castagnola’s 2006 monograph devoted to her work: “La mia lingua tardivamente maternoale è l’italiano. Quello che è successo prima—il suono, le parole di altre lingue—è come avvolto in una foschia” (131).² There is an allusion to this sensibility at the conclusion of Jaeggy’s 2001 novel *Proleterka*, when her narrator faces the reality of her shattered, scattered family: “La mia voce cambia intonazione. Mi accorgo di parlare tedesco. Lingua dei funerali, delle omelie, delle Corporazioni” (*Proleterka* 112).³

It would be tempting to read this kind of multilingual imagination as typically, completely Swiss, its multifariousness anchored in that most Swiss language of them all, *Schwiizertütsch*, a version of German that is famously baffling to outsiders and not something that would be spoken anywhere outside of Switzerland. But really, given the specifics of Swiss multilingualism, Jaeggy is more of an exception, not some sort of Super-Swiss. Indeed, it is relatively commonplace in studies of her work to

note how she really has very little to do with writing in either Italian Switzerland or Italy itself, as seen in articles by Martina Stemberger and Stefano Tomassini, both of whom cite the Italian literary critic Giovanni Pozzi to this effect. Policy and practice regarding language in Switzerland differs significantly from models in bi- and multilingual countries such as Canada. Switzerland has three “official languages”: German, French, and Italian. The federal constitution also recognizes four “national languages”: German, French, Italian, and Romansch. But the federal government does very little across languages, partially because Switzerland is a highly decentralized confederation. It is the cantons, and in some cases individual communes, whose language policy really impacts most Swiss citizens’ everyday lives. The country has very few officially bilingual cantons and only one officially trilingual one. Italian has official status in only two of the confederation’s 26 cantons: Ticino, where it is the only official language, and the trilingual Graubünden, which recognizes German, Romansch, and Italian (the canton’s name is Grigioni in Italian and Grischun in Romansch). Jaeggy, however, is originally from the monolingual-German canton of Zürich, and most of her books are either set in German-speaking cantons or feature characters that seem to be Swiss-German. Jaeggy came into Italian fully not through any engagement with Italian-speaking Switzerland but rather because of her long residence in Milan, where she lived with her husband, the writer Roberto Calasso, until his death in 2021, and continues to live there. As a younger woman, she also had a period living in Paris, which she discusses in her interview with Byron, and it is no small possibility that this is as much a reason for her attachment to French as anything having to do with *La Suisse romande*. Thus, to read Jaeggy is to always pose questions of translation, migration, and cosmopolitanism.

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This is true even when, perhaps especially when, she is engaging with Swiss identity. Francesca Parmeggiani evokes the odd way that she engages Swissness, writing that in her work overall, “time as a personal and collective experience is halted, movement is reduced to stasis, and a person’s fluid identity is defied by his/her failing agency in a given system—be it the self, family and friend circles, or a highly structured society such as the Swiss confederation in the stories of *La paura del cielo*” (170). That is most certainly true of her sense of that highly structured society in the novellas *I beati anni del castigo* (1989) and *Proleterka*, which are the main subjects of this article. Despite this preoccupation with order, structure, and the tolls that such social values extract on individual subjectivity, Jaeggy has not written any of her published work from Switzerland, nor has she written in “her” Swiss language, that language of her childhood, German (standard or otherwise). And yet, most of her best-known works—that is to say, *I beati anni del castigo* and *Proleterka*—have very precise kinds of insight into Swiss identity. Her work thus poses special problems in terms of its place in world literature. I want to sketch out the complexity of that place via two stabs at translation-inflected comparison: via Nancy Huston, and via Milan Kundera.

On the surface, Nancy Huston might seem to be the most logical comparison for Jaeggy’s practice. Huston, an important part of Canadian literature, is also someone

who writes in French, and from Paris. Just as Jaeggy's description as a Swiss writer whose corpus is in Italian, and was written from Milan, would lead most initial observers to assume she is from Ticino or perhaps Graubünden, an outsider observer would likely assume that Huston is from Quebec, or perhaps New Brunswick. But just as Jaeggy has basically built her career in the Italian language from Italy, so Huston has built her career as a Canadian writing in French through work that she has written exclusively *in France*. She is originally Anglophone, but she writes as she has lived since the 1970s: in the French language. It is thus quite possible to see the resonance with Jaeggy's experience of linguistic migration, especially when she told *Corriere della Sera* in an interview of 4 October 1998 that "Un senso di identità, forse, non l'ho mai provato. Penso che identità sia la lingua in cui si scrive. Per me è l'italiano, anche se il tedesco spesso visita i tasti della mia macchina da scrivere" (qtd. in Parmeggiani 166).⁴

306 This sense of Huston as a writer who would come to wholly belong to the French language despite her upbringing in English was not at all clear from the text of the book that seems the best comparison with her work, 1993's *Cantique des plaines*. *Cantique* was originally written in English but was first published in French, in Huston's self-translation; the English version appeared the same year as *Plainsong*. At the level of language, the work is quite complex; it is a series of excavations of family history that is narrated mostly in the second person and features frequent passages of long, twisty sentences that move in the direction of a quasi-Joycean stream of consciousness. One particularly vivid example of this comes about two thirds of the way through, when the narrator recalls her grandfather Paddon learning that his daughter is pregnant:

Karen devint hystérique et te passa le téléphone en le tenant à bout de bras comme un serpent et en hurlant C'est ta fille Paddon c'est ta fille, c'est toi qui est responsable, et tu la regardas, scié, en te disant Ainsi elle est au courant depuis toujours, Frankie a dû le lui dire avant de s'en aller, et puis, t'efforçant d'écarter cette idée absurde, tu détachas ses doigts tétanisés du combiné et l'appuyas contre ton oreille et entendis ta Ruthie, ta Ruthie chérie ton enfant préférée, tout aussi hystérique à l'autre bout du fil, et sentis ton amour pour elle remonter des profondeurs de ton estomac pour former une grosse boule dans ta gorge alors qu'elle te suppliait de lui envoyer de l'argent pour se débarrasser de cet enfant, cet enfant qui n'était qu'un accident stupide, cet enfant qui allait lui bousiller la vie, cet enfant, ton petit-enfant, il y avait un enfant, et alors tu te mis à parler très lentement Paddon, très doucement pour dissoudre la boule dans ta gorge et calmer la panique de ta fille et, tout en serrant très fort le combiné, tu te rendis compte soudain que Miranda n'avait pas une fois acquiescé à ta promesse, pas une fois intimé qu'une vie dût être sacrifiée en son honneur, du reste tu avais maintenant cinquante ans passés et le suicide, un peu comme jouer de la mandoline sous un balcon, était un geste dont le romantisme devenait franchement risible avec l'âge, et maintenant il y avait une autre vie dans la balance et tu te souvins de l'autre promesse que tu avais faite, celle de terminer ton livre, l'enfant de ton cœur et de ton cerveau, et tu compris que de le laisser inachevé serait aussi impardonnable de frapper Johnny, oui, mettre une chose au monde et puis la maltraiter—tout cela traversa ton esprit alors que les sanglots de Ruthie continuaient de couler dans les fils du téléphone, et peu à peu l'enfant dans son ventre t'apparut comme une nouvelle

chance, une renaissance du temps lui-même, la possibilité de ranimer la pauvre petite vie que Miranda avait étouffée dans l'œuf, d'aimer enfin un être dès sa naissance sans jamais le blesser ni l'abandonner ni lui mentir, et l'occasion aussi de mettre de l'ordre dans tes idées et de nettoyer ton manuscrit, de prouver que Miranda t'avait réellement appris quelque chose, à savoir que la présence d'un enfant peut favoriser la création plutôt que la frustrer, qu'il n'y a pas de scission entre le corps et l'esprit, et tu dis Ruthie, oh ma Ruthie, laisse cet enfant venir au monde, on trouvera bien le moyen de s'arranger, on s'en occupera nous jusqu'à ce que tu te sentes prête mais s'il te plaît, ne lui claques pas la porte au nez, s'il te plaît ! (*Cantique* 191-93)⁵

The complex syntax that is so important in French prose, especially of the postwar period, is here deployed by Huston in a way that is so self-consciously awkward as to only be explainable as a run-on sentence whose only logical comparison is the finale of James Joyce's *Ulysses*; Proust is, by the time we get to the end of this passage, a distant memory. In short, by way of distancing her reader Huston is "English-izing," via Ireland, as well as Zürich, Paris, and Trieste, certain elements of French syntax. This happens in a tighter, more alienating way at the very end of the work, when she quotes what seems to be "Ô Canada," a song originally written in French: "*O Canada, notre orgueil et notre bonheur, Tes érables rouge sang rappellent La Croix de Sa douleur, Et ton blé d'or transforme en pain Sa vie dont la mort fut notre gain*" (*Cantique* 310). Read in French, this seems vaguely familiar but does not scan quite right. In English, it is a different story: "*O Canada Our land our pride our love [/] High be thine aim All selfish aims above [/] Thy maple leaves blood-red recall Christ's cross of splendid pain [/] Thy golden sheaves made bread for all His life who death was gain*" (*Plainsong* 221). This, of course, is Lawrence Buchan and C. Venn Pilcher's 1938 version of "Ô Canada," published in the Anglican Church's *Book of Common Praise*. What we have here, then, is a song originally written in French that has been rewritten by the Anglican church in English, only to be brought back into French via the internal monologue of a character who is evoking an Anglophone world, one in which the Anglican church would have a special connection to Canadian identity, which has almost completely disappeared. The point I am trying to make here is that throughout *Cantique des plains*, via a number of disconnects between French and English, on sent l'Anglais; c'est-à-dire, on sent la traduction.

Jaeggy's prose has an almost opposite effect. Upon leaving Switzerland she famously became friends with Thomas Bernhard and Ingeborg Bachmann, two Austrian writers whose spare, almost minimalist prose style has made them giants of the late-modernist novel. But rather than writing in clipped, precise German, Jaeggy replicates this Germanic prose style in Italian. The Canadian novelist Sheila Heti, also writing about Jaeggy for the *New Yorker*, borrows an image from *Proleterka* when she says that "'Incorruptible crystal' is an apt description of Jaeggy's style. Her sentences are hard and compact, more gem than flesh" (100). Stefania Lucamente has made a similar observation in a more academic context, observing that "Jaeggy's prose is elegant and spare, something she shares with [Italian writer Anna] Santoro" (98). Consider, for instance, the passage in *I beati anni del castigo/Sweet Days of Discipline*,

where her teenage narrator describes her feelings of immature love for her classmate:

Non si parlò mai di amore, come invece è abitudine nel mondo. Ma avevamo la certezza che fosse prestabilito. Non parlammo mai di cose personali, della nostre famiglia, di soldi, o di sogni. Sapevo che suo padre era un banchiere di Ginevra. Una famiglia protestante. (*I beati anni del castigo* 49)⁶

The rhythms of the prose here, whose subject is French-speaking Protestants, almost make the narrator sound as though she is speaking in German, even though it is written in Italian and there is no trace of the Italian-speaking world anywhere in the text. As with Huston, throughout *I beati anni del castigo*, on sent l'Allemande; c'est-à-dire, on sent la traduction. This self-reflexivity is consistent with Stemberger's sense that "the main interest of *I beati anni del castigo* may reside in its metaliterary character, Frédérique's 'madness' serving as a vehicle for reflection on writing, on authority, on literature itself" (400).

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Part of what is going on in that passage from Huston that I quoted, with its long, flowing sentences that combine with a formal pattern that is vaguely distanced in the manner of a self-conscious translation has to do with Huston resolving an important early literary conflict; Jaeggy, I would propose, offers a solution to that conflict. Joseph Pivato has explained Huston's formal connections to an earlier generation of French literature in a 2013 article about her troubled relationship with the French tradition of the *Nouveau roman*, wherein he discusses the formal sparseness that marks the genre. After mentioning that Huston studied under Roland Barthes in her days as a student at the École des hautes études en sciences sociales, Pivato writes, "This suspicion of stylistic language as a medium that hid political assumptions and bourgeois values influenced Huston's MA thesis, a critical analysis of French swear words" (2). Pivato was following up on what Huston had written in her 1999 book-length essay *Nord perdu* about those student days and the *Nouveau roman*:

Not by chance did I make the leap in 1980—daring to embark upon fiction writing at last, just a few short months after the death of Roland Barthes. My first efforts at fiction still tried to be savvy; they gave away their own tricks and discouraged readers from believing too naively in their plots and characters [...] This is probably one of the reasons for which, some ten years later, I decided to return to writing in English. I was starved for theoretical innocence. I longed to write long, free, wild, gorgeous sentences that explored all the registers of emotion, including—why not?—the pathetic. I wanted to tell stories wholeheartedly, fervently, passionately—and to *believe* in them, without the derisive comments of the theoreticians [...] And what did I discover? Well (ah, there's a nice, laid-back, American opening to a sentence for you)—to my dismay I discovered that I was faced with the same stylistic dilemma in English as in French. I'd turned my back on my mother tongue for too long, and it no longer recognized me as its daughter. (*Losing North* 37-38)⁷

That tension is visible throughout both *Cantique des plaines*, and certainly in the passage that I just quoted. One can certainly see Huston coming in and out of a formal approach defined by "long, free, wild, gorgeous sentences that explored all the regis-

ters of emotion” in the long passage that I quoted above, a sentence that is far more Joycean than Barthesian. But even that passage concludes with the summary “Et c’est ainsi Paddon que tu devins père d’un petit-fils, deux ans à peine après que ton fils cadet eut quitté la maison” (*Cantique* 193); “And so it was Paddon that you became the father of a grandson, just two years after your youngest child had finally left home” (*Plainsong* 134). Aside from the adjective “à peine”/“just,” the sparseness here would not be out of place in a novel by Alain Robbe-Grillet or an essay by Barthes; indeed, it is telling that her French version eschews any further adjectives, whereas in English Huston allows herself to say “just two years.” Jaeggy’s prose in *I beati anni del castigo* is striking for its resolution of this problem. In the two sentences quoted above, “Sapevo che suo padre era un banchiere di Ginevra. Una famiglia protestante” we can see both a simplicity bordering on coldness at the level of syntax but a level of expressiveness that approaches what Huston evokes: “gorgeous sentences that explored all the registers of emotion, including—why not?—the pathetic.” That simple evocation of a stiff Genevan banker who stands for unexpressed love, and stands for that owing to reasons that, even though he is doubtlessly alienated from actual religious practice, are just as doubtlessly connected to a Protestantism that is practically in his bones, and thus in the bones of his unloved children: this is all squarely within the realm of *pathos*, an emotion that Huston’s teachers would have surely rejected as the false tools of the bourgeoisie, and yet is rendered by Jaeggy in a form that is just as surely connected to their own. We can see in Huston’s post-*nouveau-roman* French writing what Erica Durante has identified in Jaeggy’s work as “cette prose où les dialogues n’ont presque aucune place, où il semble que quelqu’un d’invisible ait fait grève, si ce n’est vœu de silence, une seule voix se laisse entendre” (2). Explaining Jaeggy’s deft balancing of sparseness and emotion, of naturalism and artifice, Andrea Ciccarelli could also be describing what Huston seemed to be reaching for in *Cantique des plaines* when she writes of “a language that, in its synthetic simplicity, embodies the short burst of lives allowed to her characters, through its fragmented, edgy, documentary-like style” (55).

The connection to Huston’s practice seems especially relevant here because of the settings of *Cantique des plaines* and *I beati anni del castigo*. Huston’s historical epic is set in Alberta, and to read about the finer points of turn-of-the-century southern-Alberta life in highly-tuned Parisian French is disorienting in the metaliterary fashion I was describing earlier. This is not to deny the historical or contemporary coexistence of the English and French languages on the Canadian prairies; it is just that such communities and linguistic experiences are clearly *not* what Huston is evoking here. The world of *Cantique des plaines* is that of rural Anglophone settlers near the US border, where it would be more common to hear German or, eventually, Ukrainian, than French. Similarly, Jaeggy’s native Schwiizertütsch does indeed coexist with Italian, but not in the setting of *I beati anni del castigo*. The setting for that novella is very self-consciously the canton of Appenzell; the subject matter of a very strict boarding school and a very intense friendship that develops between

two girls there, is semi-autobiographical. Jaeggy's opening sentence is: "A quattordici anni ero educanda in un collegio dell'Appenzell" (*I beati* 9).⁸ Appenzell refers to a pair of half-cantons in the Swiss confederation; the book is clearly set in the Protestant-majority Appenzell Ausserrhoden (*Appenzell extérieur* in French), since the school that the protagonist attends is named for the writer Robert Walser, born in the canton of Berne but linked to Appenzell Ausserrhoden through his family and forced to move there when his mental health began to deteriorate. When Byron asked Jaeggy why Walser seems more vivid for her than the memories of most of her school friends, she told him that "he was, or, he is, quite close to me, Robert Walser. And also because he lived in a house in the Appenzell that I knew quite well." Appenzell is well known in Switzerland as the most insular part of the country, perhaps most famous for refusing women the vote until ordered into universal suffrage by the Swiss high court in 1990. That was, of course, the year after *I beati anni del castigo* was published, and so an Appenzell setting would have been especially resonant for *un public* 310 *helvétique*, seeming to embody the essence of everything that was backward-looking and repressive about Swiss culture. It is not difficult to see Huston having a similar view of the culture of Alberta during the period of the Reform party's rise to prominence and the accompanying ascent of an insular, right-wing populism throughout the province. French would have seemed as out of place in such a southern-prairie world as would Italian in that most insularly mountainous part of Switzerland.

Thus both writers seem to be "constantly translating," in the words of Joseph Pivato's 1987 article in *CRCL/RCLC*. Pivato was referring to the experience of Italian-Canadian writers who do not fit neatly into either French or English, but who struggle for a place in Canadian literature nevertheless. He writes that "Italian-Canadian writers are trying to impregnate their new languages with the meaning and emotion left behind in the old language" ("Constantly Translating"). That is a very precise way of describing what is going on with both Huston and Jaeggy, even though it is not common to encounter discussion of either figure as an "immigrant writer." This is a category that does not exist in the same way in either France or Italy as it does in Canada, albeit for entirely different reasons. Most literary critics now generally see Huston as simply a French writer, although when *Cantique des plaines/Plainsong* has been part of critical discourse, that has generally been as part of Canadian literature, *tout court*, probably because of its prairie setting. "Immigrant writer" is the one thing Nancy Huston never seems to have been. Similarly, I do not know of any critical discourse that presents Jaeggy as anything other than a Swiss writer or as a part of the Italian language tradition, as we see in Tomassini's entry in the *Encyclopedia of Italian Literary Studies*, along with Lucamente's and Parmeggiani's articles in *Forum Italicum*.

Ciccarelli's article on Jaeggy and borders deals with this problem in interesting ways. She finally concludes:

This initial, schematic excursus on the multifaceted and multicultural components of Italian literature, prompted by Biasin's definition of literary periphery, thus, should make

us wonder if such a concept is not, after all, the more correct to define the evolution of (Italian) literature, to the point that, as suggested mostly by eastern European scholars in the geopolitical aftermath of 1989, it is more appropriate to speak of authors who write *in Italian*, rather than of Italian authors. (42-43; emphasis in original)

The matter of whether Jaeggy's "literary nationality" is Swiss or Italian, that is to say whether she should be thought of as part of Swiss literature (i.e. the literature of Switzerland) or Italian literature (i.e. the literature of Italy) is being decentred by Ciccarelli, in favour of a definition that is primarily linguistic; she is basically proposing that we stop asking unanswerable questions such as "is Jaeggy Swiss or Italian?" and shift entirely to clearer declarative statements such as "Jaeggy is someone who *writes in Italian*." So even if the notion of Jaeggy as an "immigrant writer" in Italy vaguely comes up from time to time, it is not at all in the same way that such matters have long since been of crucial importance in both Canadian and Quebec literary studies, even though Canada and Quebec, much like Switzerland and less like Italy, have official languages that are widely spoken outside their borders.

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Part of this is no doubt because Jaeggy is always explicitly writing about *Swiss* people and places; even *Proleterka*, whose setting is the self-consciously postnational space of a Yugoslavian cruise ship, is explicitly about a Swiss-German father and daughter. Early on she notes that "Mio padre, Johannes H., faceva parte di una Corporazione, una Zunft [...] La Corporazione a cui apparteneva Johannes era stata fondata nel 1336" (*Proleterka* 13).⁹ This can only be the Kambel Guild, founded in Jaeggy's home of Zürich during that year. Like so much of her work, this formulation is both semiautobiographical and a meditation on Swiss identity. I grant that the former may be more important than the latter. When Byron asked Jaeggy about the cover of the Italian edition of *Proleterka*, which is an old photo of her father in his Guild uniform and her in a folkloric bonnet, he asks if this is typically Swiss. She responded, "It's not typically Swiss, but it's typical of a cortège I walked in when I was young." That may be true, but it is difficult to separate such self-consciously mountain-folkloric dress from the Alpine Germanic culture it is part of, especially for an author who has so clearly considered the meaning of Appenzell in important earlier works such as *I beati anni del castigo*. In any event, if the task here is to try to figure out what kind of writer Jaeggy is, Nancy Huston seems to point towards a solution, in part because she remains Albertan, or at least Western-Canadian, in that complicated, not-quite-right but nevertheless inescapably present manner, that Jaeggy remains Swiss-German. Rather than exile or migrant writers, they are literary figures who have embraced new languages—Huston has always been someone who *writes in French* in a way that is similar to how Jaeggy *writes in Italian*—but who have, *selon* Pivato, impregnated their French or their Italian prose with the meaning and emotion of English Canada or la Suisse alémanique, and to a certain extent, the *Nouveau roman*. As a result, they are "always translating."

The fly in the ointment of this comparison is the degree to which Huston has gradually detached from Canada and, over the course of her career, simply become

a French writer; that is to say, simply as a writer of France, and so is very much in the mode of traditional French-republican models of integration. Jaeggy may have adopted a new language, but, unlike Huston, she has never clearly adopted another cultural identity. She may write in Italian without having any connection to Ticino or Graubünden, remains a Swiss writer in a way that Huston really does not seem like a Canadian writer anymore. In this way, a better analogy for someone who is “always translating” may be Milan Kundera. Kundera, of course, has a special place in translation-inflected literary studies because of the nonstop pain and torment that he has caused so many who practice the art of St. Jerome. I will not belabour this point, choosing rather to refer interested readers to Michele Woods’s 2006 monograph *Translating Milan Kundera*, which is a thorough and archivally-based study of the problem. What is worth pointing out here is that even when Kundera had long since adopted the French language as his primary mode of literary expression, he remained distinctly, and perhaps defiantly, Czech. Remembering that his first

312 novel *The Joke* was made into a film directed by the Slovak director Jaromil Jireš, it is tempting to say that he remained a Czechoslovak writer; that is to say, a writer whose way of seeing the world was as formed by the experience of living in Czechoslovakia in the 1960s as Jaeggy’s was by coming of age in the German-speaking Switzerland of the 1950s and 1960s, when she was in her teens and twenties. What is notable about Kundera’s central European sobriety is the way that it persists not only when writing in French, but also when writing about parts of French history that have achieved the status of legend in literary circles. I am especially struck by the passage in his 1997 novel *L’identité*, in which he discusses May 1968:

Chantal imagine Leroy aux réunions houleuses de la révolte estudiantine de 1968, débitant, à sa façon intelligente, logique, et sèche, les sentences contre lesquelles toute résistance du bon sens était condamnée à la débâcle : la bourgeoisie n’a pas le droit de vivre ; l’art que la classe ouvrière ne comprend pas doit disparaître ; la science qui sert les intérêts de la bourgeoisie est sans valeur ceux qui l’enseignent, il faut les chasser de l’université ; il n’y a pas de liberté pour les ennemis de la liberté. Plus la phrase qu’il proférerait était absurde, plus il en était fier, car seule une très grande intelligence est capable d’insuffler un sens logique aux idées insensées. (*L’Identité* 172-73)¹⁰

What we can see in this passage is the cool voice of an outsider, an author who has integrated fully into the French language but not into the illusions of the French literary class. I can sense a similar detachment on the part of Jaeggy when she evokes the ancient rituals of Appenzell in ways that seem cold and distant, as though relayed, in the words of Corinthians, through a glass, darkly:

Madame teneva la sua tazza in mano, accennò che nell’Appenzell gli uomini andavano a votare con l’arma bianca e le donne guardavano dalla finestra, e Madame si voltò verso la finestra, ma mi accorsi che guardava la figlia. Aveva trovato una ragione per guardarla. Madame tornò alla meteorologia. (*I beati* 102)¹¹

Like Kundera, she has no illusions about this famous Appenzell ritual wherein men come to the town square every year to hear addresses by government leaders and

to vote on the canton's budget, the daggers strapped to their waists serving as their symbol of citizenship. The first volume of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's memoir *Between Two Millstones* has a long and lyrical passage devoted to this ritual, concluding that "Having unanimously re-elected their beloved Landammann, entrusting him with the formation of the kind of government he wanted, they immediately rejected all his major proposals. And now he is to govern! [...] This is the kind of democracy we could do with" (111-12). No such romanticism obtains in *I beati anni del castigo*; rather than experiencing an epiphany about the possibility of redeeming the democratic tradition, Jaeggy's narrator can only ramble and bog down in small details before curtly remarking how little any of this really has to do with communal life. The Italian language has made Jaeggy as cool to the culture she was born into as the memories of Communist excess has made Kundera cool to the romanticism of the nation whose language he has so fully embraced. If Huston shows us that Jaeggy is "constantly translating," then Kundera shows us that Jaeggy's work is defined by a kind of distance and radical scepticism that evolves from the experience of moving across cultures, and especially across languages. Only a Czech writer could write about French history in this manner. For a Swiss writer to write about Swiss culture with a comparable detachment, she needs a comparable distance; to write like this about the culture, she must leave the language behind.

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These are tentative approaches to Fleur Jaeggy's work, but I think they point in the right direction. For lack of a better way of putting it, Jaeggy is a certain kind of writer, holding a certain place in world literature. Her work is as unmistakably Swiss (and more specifically Swiss-German), just as Huston was unmistakably Canadian (and more specifically Western-Canadian) in the early 1990s and Kundera has remained unmistakably Czech (or Czechoslovak). But in all three cases, the approach to culture is through that dark glass of Corinthians,¹² an image that has so often been used as a metaphor for translation. Even though literal translation is not always an issue chez Jaeggy, any more than it is with Huston or Kundera, there is an imperative to interpret their work through the spirit of translation. In this way, they served as avatars for a more globalized European literature that is still in the process of emerging.

NOTES

1. Andrea Ciccarelli quotes the interview Jaeggy gave to *Corriere della Sera*, in which she explains this biography in a more detailed way: "In casa parlavamo francese, un po' di tedesco, e un po' d'italiano. L'italiano era la lingua di mia madre. Lei discendeva da una famiglia di italiani che se erano trasferiti in Svizzera nella prima metà dell'800. Da parte di mio padre, invece, gli Jaeggy erano svizzeri tedeschi, protestanti zwingliani" ("In the house we spoke French, a bit of German, and a bit of Italian. Italian was the language of my mother. She came from a family from Italy that had migrated to Switzerland in the first half of the nineteenth century. As for my father, on the other hand, the Jaeggys were Swiss-Germans, protestants and followers of Huldrych Zwingli") (qtd. in Ciccarelli 49, n. 29; my translation).

2. "My late-coming mother tongue is Italian. That which came before—the sound, the words of another

language—is shrouded in a mist” (my translation).

3. “The tone of my voice changes. I realize that I am speaking German. As if that language had been imposed on me. The language of funerals, of sermons, of the Guilds” (*SS Proleterka* 120).
4. “The sense of an identity: perhaps, I never felt it. I think identity is the language one writes in. To me, [that is] Italian, even though German often pays a visit to my typewriter’s keyboard” (Parmeggiani’s translation and brackets.)
5. *Plainsong* 133-34.
6. “We never spoke of love, the way most people do. But we were certain it was predestined. We never spoke about personal things, about our families, about money, about dreams. I knew her father was a banker in Geneva. A Protestant family” (*Sweet Days of Discipline* 42).
7. *Nord perdu* 49-50.
8. “At fourteen I was a border at a school in the Appenzell” (*Sweet Days* 1).
9. “My father, Johannes H., was a member of a Guild, a Zunft [...] The Guild to which Johannes belonged was founded in 1336” (*SS Proleterka* 7).
- 314 10. “Chantal imagines Leroy at the turbulent meetings of the 1968 student revolt, spouting in his intelligent logical, dry style the maxims any commonsensical resistance was doomed to be defeated by: the bourgeoisie has no right to exist; art that the working class doesn’t understand must disappear; science that serve the interests of the bourgeoisie is worthless; those who teach it must be thrown out of the university; no freedom for the enemies of freedom. The more absurd the proposal he was advancing, the prouder he was of it, because it takes a very great intelligence to breathe logical meaning into meaningless ideas” (*Identity* 139).
11. “Madame kept her cup in her hand, she remarked that in Appenzell the men went to vote with their swords while the women watched from the window; and Madame turned towards the window, but I realised she was looking at her daughter. She had found a reason for looking at her. Madame went back to the weather” (*Sweet Days* 96).
12. 1 Corinthians 13:12: “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known” (*KJV*).

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