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“A foreign language in a familiar country”, or Language, Genealogy, and the City in Marianne Ackerman’s “Jump”

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**“A FOREIGN LANGUAGE IN A FAMILIAR COUNTRY”,
OR LANGUAGE, GENEALOGY, AND THE CITY IN
MARIANNE ACKERMAN’S *JU***

Grand port of navigations, multiple
The lexicons uncargo'd at your quays,
Sonnant through strange to me; but chiefest, I,
Auditor of your music, cherish the
Joined double-melodied vocabulaire
Where English vocable and roll ecossic,
Mollified by the parle of the French
Bilinguafact your air!
(A.M. Klein *Montreal*) (Klein 316)

Résumé : Le roman de Marianne Ackerman intitulé *Jump* appartient sans doute à ce que Deleuze et Guattari appelaient « une littérature mineure », « celle qu'une minorité fait dans une langue majeure » et dans « la langue [qui] est affectée d'un fort coefficient de déterritorialisation » (1977: 16). Le roman dépeint les conflits et les interdépendances entre les Francophones au Québec et les Anglo-Québécois. Les relations entre deux groupes sont présentées par ce qui est arrivé à Myra Grant, journaliste d'âge mûr. Bien que linguistiquement « anglo », elle traite son irlandicité et son habitation à Montréal comme deux centres de son identité. Comme c'est dans bien d'autres cas de littératures mineures, la généalogie importe sur le fait de parler l'anglais. Pour Myra l'anglais, ainsi que la ville de Montréal, constituent plus une patrie que tout le Canada, perçu ici comme une notion abstraite, peu pertinente pour l'expérience du Québec. Cette province se présente comme un lieu d'une grande qualité artistique, « une nation de muses » (*Jump* 82) où « l'art compte » (*Jump* 82). En tant que concepts alternatifs de nation, outre la question de la langue maternelle, s'offre une solution aux dilemmes identitaires de la fin du vingtième siècle, qui se poursuit au vingt-et-unième siècle.

If anyone had doubts whether Montreal is a bilingual, or rather a multilingual city, the reading of the stanza by the famous Anglo-Quebecker poet A.M. Klein should clear them.¹ A lot has changed since Klein's times, as parts of Montreal have become more uniformly French-speaking and the policy of the province has also reflected this emphasis on the French language, but the poetry above reflects the interplay of French and English that still takes place in Quebec. As Northrop Fry notes, the poem was created following the commentary on Joyce's *Ulysses* that Klein wrote in the 1940s. Commenting on the Anglo-Irish writer's language-hyperconscious *oeuvre* about Dublin must have influenced the form and content of this "parodic bilingual panegyric on Montreal" (Fry 174). The soundscape of Montreal is hailed in this excerpt due to its wealth of languages and to indubitable inspiration that it provides for its observer, a poet who like all artists is sensitive to his surroundings. When Klein wrote this both Montreal and its culture were truly bilingual if such was his response to the city, but the reference to "roll ecossic" demonstrates Klein's awareness of the variety noticeable even within the Anglo-Quebecker language and culture. This article will analyze the questions of language, genealogy, and Anglo-Quebecker responses to Montreal in the novel *Jump* written by another English-language writer, Marianne Ackerman. Deleuze and Guattari's theory of minor literatures will provide a point of departure for this interpretation. Furthermore, the novel portrays the intricacies of the relationship between language and genealogy and it presents a Joycean critical attitude to the place that the main character loves.

Montreal has changed a lot since the times when Klein's poetry was written, but Marianne Ackerman's *Jump*, a novel published in 2000, includes a similar vision of the coexistence of the two languages. The novel portrays what Deleuze and Guattari call a "minor literature" in its mature version, elaborating on what is very often only signaled in Klein's poetry. Klein's poems are examples of the writing by Montreal Jewish community, which Pilar Cuder-Dominguez names the most literarily visible minority in Quebec culture; she evokes the names of Mordecai Richler and Leonard Cohen as its important prose writers (353). Despite the central character's denials, the novel *Jump* seems to have been inspired both by the city's Jewish literary culture with Richler's Joycean vision of an identity crisis as it was presented in his *Son of a Smaller Hero* (1955) and by the even more Joycean idea of self-exile as the only way to see the place in which one lives more clearly. Both the Jewish Anglo-Quebecker and the Anglo-Irish allusions are observable in Ackerman's text, which shows that Joyce's writing influenced

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not only the earlier modernist poetry, such as that of A.M. Klein, but also the prose written at the turn of the twenty-first century.

In 1986 in the *Introduction* to Deleuze and Guattari's *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, Réda Bensmaïa notes that "bi-lingual writing practices (...) until now (...) had to pass through a long purgatory before even being read, much less recognized" (xvi). *Jump* is a bilingual novel, since some phrases uttered by the characters are in French, which proves that code-switching is frequent in Quebec. What is even more important, the intricacy of that literature hinges on its simultaneously being written in English and demonstrating the devotion to Quebec that the English-speaking characters feel as much as the French-speaking ones do. As a recent instance of bilingual writing practice, *Jump* does not have to go through any purgatory any longer. It may be read as a commentary on the question of language and identity in Quebec and it demonstrates how valuable the so-called "minor" literatures are in assessing those issues. Importantly, Enoch Padolsky noticed that in the Canadian context the terms "minority" and "majority" refer to "economic, political, institutional, prestige-related" status and not to numbers (26). The "minor" status of Anglo-Quebecker literature was acknowledged by Gregory J. Reid, who in his article "Is There an Anglo-Québécois Literature" argued that "some literatures can be better or more compellingly read as 'minor' than others" and that Anglo-Quebecker literature belongs to that corpus of writing (62). He notices a paradox in which also Ackerman's *Jump* participates: those novels "deny the existence of an English Quebec community, while it is exactly those literary, detailed, extremely narrated denials that bring the community into existence" (Reid 273). The environment is "a familiar country" for Anglo-Quebeckers, as the quotation from *Jump* conveys this idea, but speaking English in it makes the literature written in this "foreign language" a minor one. French in turn is for them a "foreign language", as it figures in the quotation in the epigraph to this study.

Deleuze and Guattari thus specify the conditions that contribute to the status of a "minor literature". Firstly, "A minor literature doesn't come from a minor language; it is rather what a minority constructs within a major language. But the first characteristic of minor literature in any case is that in it language is affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization" (Deleuze and Guattari 16). Anglo-Quebeckers do not feel fully at home in Quebec due to the foreign language they speak. Still, the deterritorialization they are affected by does not have to exert a negative influence on their sense of identity, as I am going to prove here. Quite the reverse, the deterritorialization is what attracts them to this "familiar country"; it is exactly what makes the country familiar to them. The self-identification of an Anglo-Quebecker seems to be an associational one: it is the identity of choice and it results in satisfaction with the position of someone speaking a "foreign" language in Quebec. After all, as Sherry Simon writes, French constitutes the matrix for Montreal's cultural life, which is a situation that makes all other languages foreign (23).

The second quality that Deleuze and Guattari note is the politicization of discourse in the minor literatures. In *Jump* the use of English may also have the function of a political declaration towards the French-speaking majority. Consequently, very often the use of English is not something entirely innocent in relation to Quebec's and generally Canada's colonial past. The novel's main character, Myra Grant, defines herself as Irish and not English, referring to the Irish part of her genealogical background, hence her English identity includes the element of denial. Genealogy is generally most important in minor literatures, as they always relate to the symbolic father, which is either the father language or the country of origin, as Deleuze and Guattari claim in the chapter "Exaggerated Oedipus: Relation to the Father" (9-15). The symbolic father is related to through the process of Oedipalization: he is rejected, which paradoxically confirms the bond between him and the minor literature in question. In Anglo-Quebecker literature it is always meaningful which English-language group and English-language country one originates from. In *Jump* Myra defines herself as someone not originally from Quebec, as is noted by the narrator in the sentence: "Being of Irish extraction and from Ontario, Myra's no expert on Scottish clans or their preferences in skirts (...)" (Ackerman 69). It is an innocent remark which does not directly aim to state Myra's cultural identification yet, but it is complemented by what comes further, namely her statement: "I'm Irish, see. Née Myra Mary Callaghan." (Ackerman 84). The utterance pronounced by Myra herself demonstrates the importance of this Irish genealogy for her. The reason for this and for the position of the English language in this identity puzzle is political, as if to confirm Deleuze and Guattari's diagnosis of minor literatures' political nature: "(...) I'm telling you we had English shoved down our throats, by the English. Who were our enemies from, say, a few hundred years before you Frenchmen set foot on this part of the planet" (Ackerman 84). The ambiguity over the use of English, so visible in the Anglo-Irish literature, is here complemented by the more complex situation of someone who by necessity speaks English surrounded by the French, in whom this English may cause aversion. Yet, the only first language she speaks is English, even if she distances herself from its colonial imposition upon the Irish several centuries before. This Englishness, despite its historical imposition on her ancestors, is something she cannot abandon. She is locked up in it, which may cause the reactions of rebellion and denial.

The whole Canadian literature, written both in English and in French, has already been called a minor literature (Godard 153-184). As for Anglo-Canadian literature, not only do English-speaking Canadians write in a major language, but they represent a minority in English literature when compared with all those writers who are associated with Britain in some way, since they were either born or immigrated there. Still, in *Jump* also the Irish origin turns out an identity of choice, since Myra associates more with her Irish roots than

with her Polish Jewish heritage. It used to be very important for Myra's mother Isabel, but fell into oblivion in Myra's consciousness despite its being signaled by her first name:

Patrick had wanted to call the baby Mary, after his mother, but his wife said it's too common. According to the oft-told story, with so few relatives of her own, only a great-aunt in Toronto and a brother somewhere in Poland, Isabel had faced their wedding day with trepidation, half-expecting the groom's side of the church to sink from the weight of his clan and fall right into Lake Ontario. When it came to naming children, she wanted some sign of her ancient Jewish heritage, so they called the first-born Myra and her brother Jake (Ackerman 302).

Only vaguely suggested by the scarcity of Isabel's relatives, the Holocaust seems to be haunting the family history and it must have influenced the mother's idea of preserving Jewishness in Myra's name. Yet, Myra identifies herself more strongly with the Irishness implied by her second name than with this oblique Jewish stock she derives from. The Jewishness has been lost for her for many years in the novel since her mother died of cancer when Myra went to college and there were no relatives of Isabel who could preserve the memory of this origin for her two children. Some cultural and linguistic identities are more important than others for individuals, as the text conveys it, and both the "Englishness" and "Irishness" of Myra are exposed as real to her, since she speaks English and has Irish roots, while the Jewishness remains spectral. The spectral nature of the Jewish background demonstrates that, like her Englishness, Jewishness denied is the identity which is paradoxically important. The fact that Myra chooses to forget about it may exemplify the strategy of deliberately keeping silent over Jewishness as a reaction to the post-Holocaust trauma. In order not to relive the trauma Myra prefers to call herself Irish and rejects identification with the painful past of her mother's family. Instead, the passage above may cause what Norman Ravvin calls "a shock of recognition" in the reader, who suddenly realizes that Myra's family experienced one of the biggest tragedies in the twentieth-century history of Europe (9).

Not only the act of keeping silent over her Jewishness demonstrates Myra's association with that culture. The novel alludes to the writing of Mordecai Richler exemplified by *Son of a Smaller Hero* in that it also portrays a severe crisis experienced by its central character. Unlike Richler's protagonists Myra is a woman, but she also undergoes a difficult period in her life. Middle-aged, she suffers acutely when she realizes that she will never be reunited with her husband from whom she has been separated. She remembers how "the glue of family life was coming undone in Montreal" once, when her children were still small (Ackerman 9) and she looks critically upon herself in the novel's "now". Her first critique is directed against her own appearance:

“(...) but the wall of mirror is irresistible, she is fascinated by the reflection, jean skirt so old it hugs her bum and a cast-off sweater from [her daughter] Sally, feet spilling out of her last summer’s sandals, no makeup, wild hair” (Ackerman 23). She seems to need to stop judging herself by her appearance, but probably also to take care of that appearance so that she would not stand out from other women of her age. She keeps comparing herself with her past self, which is not very productive and may cause crisis: “Compared to the girl beside Jack in the misty old photo, she looks worn out, as pale as newsprint. Forty-two years old. Exactly the way 42 used to look when she was young and critical and determined never to get old and boring” (Ackerman 38).

She realizes her loneliness as a woman once she looks at her body in the bathroom: “She looked at her body coldly, and thought how much it looks like the house, sloping unconsciously, resisting the drift, barely. Neglected, ignored. A place where things happen, but unremarkable in itself” (Ackerman 228). Montreal appears to be a place where her feeling of loneliness exacerbates, since she does not feel a part of any community there, only a friend to individuals. During the crisis she experiences Myra does not examine only her appearance, but focuses on her character and comments on it: “Jack’s right. I’m way too intense. Things just are. Not all causes have effects” (Ackerman 26). She wants to discover who she really is and this is the first titular “jump” she makes: this is a jump towards self-discovery. The causes of the crisis are not only internal, but also external, as the world around her and her closest ones changes radically. Her adult daughter goes to college and turns out to be in a relationship Myra disapproves of, since Sally is in love with one of her professors. Myra’s whole life calls for a reconstruction when Jack asks her for divorce after several years of separation. She needs to make the titular “jump” into a life different from her previous one and also away from the ethnically and culturally hybrid Montreal.

Hybridity is visible not only in Myra’s linguistic and cultural origins, but also in the language of Montreal, her city of choice. It is characterized as “a city of impure language” (Ackerman 48), where the two languages mix to a disconcerting extent. As the narrator traces the history of language diversity, she says: “traditionally, English-speakers settled the west side and the French took the east, but now the two spill over, and are outnumbered by newcomers” (Ackerman 49). St Laurence Boulevard illustrates it adequately with its “voice a babble of English, French, a warped mixture of the two, and a dozen other languages spoken openly, loudly, persistently” (Ackerman 49). Instead of the division into the “two solitudes”, a truly multicultural mixture of languages and cultural identities is produced. In the novel Ackerman accounts for the presence of other languages and ethnic identities, a presence that has too often been ignored in Quebec, as Pilar Cuder-Dominguez proves when she writes about the social reality and its reflection in Lorena Gale’s play *Je me souviens* and George Elliott Clarke’s opera libretto *Québécoisité* (353-361).

In the end, in Ackerman's novel the Quebecois interculturalism and mingling of languages is not only declarative, as the scene at the hairstylist's salon, "Click", shows: "Barry's assistant Chantal came downstairs to greet Myra. Bon, alors, this way, s'il vous plaît. No squabbles with language at Click, all conversation takes place in a fluid mixture of English and

French, often within the same sentence" (Ackerman 229). People talk to each other in that mixture outside any politically laden context and they do not have to justify why they use this language or the other. The duplicity of the language used also becomes visible when the narrator focuses on the place names in Montreal, exemplifying it with

The Main (...) St Lawrence Boulevard, also known as le boulevard St-Laurent, depending upon where you're from or when you arrived. Appellation is a serious issue these days. Many streets have two names, the modern militant French version, and an older anglo moniker. For people who've grown used to the latter the frenchification of a place-name can sound pretentious, objectionable. But newcomers tend to embrace the official French, swallow it whole and spit it back out as an English word. *Sanlauron*, St. Lawrence, St-Laurent a.k.a. The Main (Ackerman 48).

Yet, the double naming of places becomes a serious issue after all because the novel is set in the midst of the 1995 Referendum. Otherwise, the language choice is a private question and a fairly accidental one. For instance, Myra is related to an important French-speaking politician, René Lévesque, Premier of Quebec in the years 1976-1985, but this is not what motivates her to vote "oui" in the Referendum. Her pro-independence stance is a result of decisions she made about what is good for Quebec and not of the language she uses or her genealogy.

Most English-speaking people consciously choose Quebec as a place to live. Apart from the immigrants who flock to the city in the way they would to any other place in Canada,

(...) there is another kind of migrant, numerous, less visible. Self-styled refugees. Internal exiles. WASPs on the lam. No great headlines behind their move, from St. John's to Vancouver, they fled – and still do – the drudgery of careers, the tedium of jobs, the end of U.I., the waste of school, the flatness of home. Anti-American, too poor for Europe, they abandon ROC, the rest of Canada, for a foreign language in a familiar country, the mystery of Quebec. They come here for cheap rent, abundant beer, three a.m. closing time, passion, politics, art, the scene. They come here to breathe. The frenchification that drove so many old anglos out of Quebec is the very reason these almost-ex-pats dig in. They don't want the feeling of home. They are open-minded and excitable. Desperate, optimistic or both. They are the Divided Empire Loyalists of fin de siècle Montreal (Ackerman 50).

The cultural diversity and freedom from the domination of English-language culture make Montreal a place of choice. The Anglos may seem to be frightening to the French-speaking Quebecers, but are not necessarily so if they are not even seen as a part of a larger English-speaking group which could dominate: “Myra cringes at being identified with 600,000 disparate desperate English-speaking Quebecers, most of them raving federalists with little in common (...) [for Ms Lamotte] Anglo Quebec is a ready reminder of the real menace, the English-speaking world” (Ackerman 69). For all those for whom Quebec is a place of choice there does not exist one uniform English-speaking community and this is precisely the situation they wanted to find themselves in: “Welcome or not, they are thrilled to be here, in a city state with the mythical force of a country. A maddening town that dazzles and blinds. A place to be discovered. A time, a beginning. Imagination, soul, heart. The word itself is rock and sleek magic beautiful blue. Montreal” (Ackerman 50). Naturally, their devotion to Quebec and to the idea of its independence from the rest of Canada may also be threatening to *pure laine* Quebecers. When Myra admits that she will vote “oui” in the Referendum, her ex-husband’s girlfriend Paulette seems frightened, as if an important part of her identity was being taken away from her by all those who share her political beliefs despite being Anglos. It seems that this attitude is something which makes the Anglos more frightening for some French speakers in the novel.

The reasons for what political beliefs Myra holds are simple: “I live in Quebec. I have lived in Quebec for 15 years. My children live here. Je suis québécoise” (Ackerman 32). For Myra Quebec’s independence would confirm its position of “a city state with the mythical force of a country” (Ackerman 50). The force of the myth would allow Quebec to metamorphose into a political entity and confirm its uniqueness and difference from the English-dominated rest of Canada. Still, Myra does not claim that the Frenchness of Quebec and the Englishness of the rest is not accidental. Quebec is a French place in the midst of Englishness due to pure chance that made the English triumph over the French and leave them only this province. According to Myra it will all be the same with the referendum:

Fate, fluke, weather will all play a part in the outcome, as it has always been this way, from the beginning. In 1759, Scottish Highland soldiers under British command fought the French from France and Canadiens on the Plains of Abraham, a 15-minute skirmish that ended with generals on both sides, Montcalm and Wolfe, dead (...) When [the victorious flag] turned out to be the British Ensign, the real history of these parallel peoples began: a history without much bloodshed and few rousing anthems, a history of tall ships on the horizon, compromise, backroom deals and tie games hanging on the final face-off. This referendum is a tie game. When the ballots are counted, many words will be spent on the meaning of victory and defeat, far too few on the power of fake, fluke and weather (Ackerman 182).

The loss of the referendum in 1995, "Non, No, But very close" (Ackerman 187) was also the result of pure chance again.

For Anglos in the novel Montreal becomes a country of choice for several reasons. The first of them must definitely be called the love that they develop when they first arrive there. This is what Myra confesses to her friend Pain:

"I'll never leave Montreal. It's the best city in the world."

"How long have you been living here?"

She says, "Fifteen years."

"And still in love. That's impressive." (Ackerman 141)

Myra denies her love for Montreal with the words "I'm not in love, I'm just living, that's all. Anyway, what is love? (...)" (Ackerman 141). The denial shows that Pain identified Myra's attachment correctly. Perhaps, like her denial of Englishness, the denial of love for Montreal shows that the emotion is there. Demonstrating his own more ambiguous relation to the city, Pain mocks Myra when he says that "love is a disease that makes people blind and deaf (...) [and not to] feel pain" (Ackerman 141). The identity adopted by Myra seems to be stronger than the identity attached to one from one's birth onwards that Pain has.

Montreal in the novel also has its dark sides. Criticism of the city starts with its being termed "a backwater" by Joey Rosenbaum, a representative of yet another important cultural minority of Quebec, the Montreal Jews, even though his parents moved to Montreal and were not born there (Ackerman 62). Yet, its identity of a backwater for the English makes it desirable for artists who have there more liberty to create what they aspire to. Furthermore, living in Quebec allows one to experience how history is made, since according to Myra "the destiny of Quebec is the most important issue in contemporary Canadian history" (Ackerman 71). She argues that "it's the reason I – we – are here. To live that destiny." The loss of the referendum by the independence activists shows that Canada is not yet ready to accept a different form of a country. In the 1995 of the novel it is still debatable whether "a country can exist as little patches of territory" (Ackerman 293) and it is what even Myra, who votes "oui", finds controversial. Another aspect of the criticism issued toward Montreal is that it is a "crazy, neurotic city" which needs art so that layers were "scraped off it", as Myra argues to Joey (Ackerman 173). This is what Joey tries to do with his bilingual theatre in order to find "the truth", to cite Myra (Ackerman 173). Neurosis as the discomfort of being oneself proves to be beneficial for the art produced in Quebec, since the discomfort encourages artists to try to find out the real face of the city with its multiplicity of languages, voices, and identities. According to Joey the "interplay of language (...) [is] natural and potent" (Ackerman 175) and it expresses best who Quebecers are.

Being a Quebecker encourages Myra to become an artist herself. She intends to find a literary voice for the Quebec she knows by writing a book about it. In a manner reminiscent of Joyce's Anglo-Irish voice at the end of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, she wants to see her mother country of choice from a distance in order to see it better. Myra states whom she is when she utters: "I am not *from* Montreal," Myra insisted. "I am *of* Montreal, temporarily out of Montreal, spending a year or two away in order to get perspective and write a book about Quebec." (Ackerman 326). Myra seems to be Ackerman's *alter ego* here. As a writer the literary character will probably give a new face to Quebec, different from the conventional image of its "society with a French face", as was once stated by Linda Leith in her discussion of Quebec writing in English (Leith). Yet, unlike Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, she does not intend to "forge in the smithy of [her] soul the uncreated conscience of [her] race" (Joyce 288). The conscience of Anglo-Quebeckers is something very much in existence, but the actual diversity of cultural identities there and their interrelationships makes it important for their identity to reassert itself. Yet, what Myra needs to observe from a distance is the diversity of cultural identities and their interrelationships. This confirms the regularity that Linda Leith observed in the whole Anglo-Quebecker literature, namely that some of the best writers representing that minority, such as Constance Beresford-Howe or Mavis Gallant, did most of their writing while living outside Quebec (Leith). An Anglo-Quebecker is not just a foreigner living in a familiar country, but someone who is likely to become a foreigner in some other part of Canada in order to gain a better perspective on what he or she deliberately chose as a home, but abandoned for some time. Ackerman ultimately argues that physical distance from the place one chose for life seems more beneficial for one's art, especially if the place is as intercultural and politically conflicted as Montreal of the 1990s. Consequently, even the place Myra chose is refused by her, becoming the ultimate denial of the novel. If minor literatures have a conflicted relationship with the "father", this is also the case with Myra's relationship with both her Englishness and, finally, with her country of origin, Quebec, but the existence of conflict does not question one's attachment, as the novel shows.

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