Negotiating Languages.
An Introduction to the Writings of Seymour Mayne

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In spite of Seymour Mayne's easiness in generating literary discourses, his short texts can be constantly read as manifestos – be they ironic, why not? – of a cross-cultural understanding of the world. He proudly asserts his Jewishness, but this does not mean that his ethnic background forces a reductionist perspective upon his *Weltanschauung*. In this article I shall follow the paradigms of trans- and cross communication in a work which is simultaneously Jewish and Canadian, if not more than this. The approaches specific to cultural studies are of great help in surprising the importance of cultural heritage for devising a better future, capable of interrogation and dubitation; a future which does not espouse a simplistic bipolar perspective.

Mayne's creation is unflinchingly guided by the principle of alterity. Different types of discourses constantly interweave. By discourse I understand memories, accents, inflections, tastes, even gestures and objects. He produces an argumentation not that much with arguments, but with suggestions and idiosyncrasies. The effects are very influential:

> L'argumentation comme pratique sociale s'inscrit dans une problématique générale d'influence: tout sujet parlant cherche à faire partager à l'autre son univers de discours. Il s'agit là de l'un des principes qui fonde l'activité langagière: le principe d'altérité (Boix 2007: 14).

If in poetry Seymour Mayne revitalized the *word sonnet*, in prose he favored short stories of a savvy nature. Without any anxiety of influence, he allowed for all colors, fragrances, shapes and habits to invade his works. Every prose of his is to be authenticated by the richness of details. *The Old Blue Coach*, for instance, is a prose about furniture, if we are to judge a gift horse by its teeth. The couch is part of a heritage: "the leather-seat chairs, the chipped though sturdy table, the credenza that came with it. Imposing. Solid" (Mayne 2012: 10). Actually, there is a mythology of heritages here as messengers from old times and faraway places. Objects carry with them remembrances and reinstate bygone atmospheres and mentalities. In order to

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underline the stylistic facets of objects, the writer arranges for them to be carried from historical areas, in terms of heredity. Objects successfully replace words and revive dear ghosts. In this way, "reality outgrows the art form: the art form is no longer equal to the reality around it" (Barr 2006: 433).

1. The All-Ingurgitating Canadian Spirit

Even the spree of imagination stirred by some objects complies with the multicultural profuseness of the Canadian civilization. It may be true that Canada is a young country, but the people and their belongings transported there brought with them centuries of history. Thus, the crossing of borders gets attuned to interfering epochs and nationalities. A humble blue coach is the symbol of an intricate history:

> I have always imagined that it was dug up from the site of a burned-out hostel in the Laurentians. On a full moon in the early fall I even imagine it was once – in a previous incarnation – the divan or daybed of a desert potentate. Somehow it was lifted during the Napoleonic wars, strapped to the largest and strongest camel and taken to Alexandria where a Greco-Egyptian poet later adopted it for a few decades. A Lebanese immigrant to Canada later brought it here on a Canadian Pacific liner and it made its sundry roundabout routes (Mayne 2012: 11).

As an enclave of immigrants, the Canadian soil is a reflection of the whole civilizational system. It "assembles" differences and generates a sui-generis community. The mosaic is the symbol of *unitas multiplex*. Some would highlight the dislocation and the substitution involved in setting up such a project (Rankine, Sewell 2007: 58). That is why the protagonists of Mayne's prose give in to the impulse of *collecting*. They do not like to replace, to modernize.

This is the reason for the highly humorous maledictions proffered by the proprietor deprived of his old couch: "May you lie on it/ with a splitting headache", "May you moan upon it/with a migraine throbbing/ into full strength", "May your veins bulge/ and your vessels swell/ behind your brigand's brow" (*idem*: 24).

The blue couch is a vehicle able to displace its possessor into the remotest corners of time and space. It offers cross-cultural visions and restores memories. The loss of such a time-space-machine motivates enough the comic action of stapling poster-size photocopies of a gothic-written script on the telephone poles in the neighborhood: "Curses upon the thief or thieves who stole the old blue couch from my front porch during the early hours of June 7, 1986" (*idem*: 25).

In a 2011 interview, Seymour Mayne delineated the "usefulness" of his art:

> Sounds old-fashioned and it is. You want to give people pleasure at the same time as some kind of insightful illumination into experience. And if you can do both, then it's a wonderful miracle that suddenly appears on the page (Gladstone 2011: link quoted).

The comforting side of "international" objects is evidenced in *The Story of My Aunt's Comforter*. This time is about a sizeable trunk which is shipped from Bialystok to Montreal, together with aunt Zhenia in 1929. While the trunk is embarked, one of the porters can't help asking her: "It's so light, a bit of Polish spirit" (Mayne 2012: 32). Montreal is Canada's largest French-speaking city, and the world's second largest Francophone urban center. The comforter proves to be a

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pookh "for the Canadian winter", that is an eiderdown. Jewish objects, if we can call them like this, have exotic names and utilities. They may be crucially useful in their original place, but a bit cumbersome when transferred. When it comes to space, Canada is the right place for accommodating whatever out-of-place objects and mentalities. In an interview offered to Andrei Zbîrnea in 2014, Mayne captured the meteorological and variegated quintessence of his country:

> Canada is a great snowy expanse of subarctic territory with oases of cities and towns all fed by gas and oil pipelines from our western province, Alberta. The country is too large and varied to just fold up and wrap into one iconic image (Zbîrnea 2011: link quoted).

2. The Role of Meta-Objects in Preserving Identity

This "oily" artificiality of the country is an epitome of its multi-layered humanity. Objects cross space easier than time. For the new generations, these endeared objects lose their international patina and retain only a cumbersome exoticism.

As we know, from time immemorial Jewishness has deployed its caustic humor. *Goldberg's Tallit* tells a paradoxical story of faith, purity and crass possessiveness. A tallit is a prayer shawl under which the devout can recite lists of sins, can pledge to give supplementary donations in the future and many other holy enterprises.

But every good intention is tipped over when the suspicious Jewish spirit flares up. What if the supplicant in front of you is covered by a tallit similar to the one you drop in the basket when you leave the synagogue?

> What if he actually took mine instead? I agonize. Should I go up and check it out with him? What'll he think – that I'm some kind of a freak, some meshugganer? What do you take me for, he'll retort – a tallit lifter? (Mayne 2012: 43).

Thus, objects accumulate some identitary traits that transform them into meta-objects. Life without those identity-markers would be calm but automatic and spiceless. The Jewish *witz* is invigorated by the "dementia" caused by such magic artefacts: "what I need is someone to dissipate this tension with a kibbitz, a joke, a humorous hyperbole" (*idem*: 45).

Jokes and self-irony apart, without such *witnessing* objects one is lost and debased in multicultural civilizations. One belongs nowhere and loses any pedigree. Life and death are inconceivable without cross-cultural – spatially and temporally –, objectified totems:

> A quality tallit is a lifetime purchase, it goes with you everywhere and it clings to you – like a skin […]. And remember, they will wrap you in it when you go on the afterlife and it will be with you on the day of the Resurrection of the Dead (*idem*: 45).

Not even the sound emitted by the ram's horn, *Tekiyah gedolah*, is able to assuage this mixture of territoriality and metaphysics. Identity and its carriers join to form identity sets "which incorporate both the traditional concept of identity and the new concept of proto-identity" (Freese, Burke 1994: 11), in which *meanings* configure identities and *resources* proto-identities.

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3. Liquefied Worlds and Darwinian Perils

The epitome of this universalistic, eternal and ethereal approach is identifiable in *Seymours International*, a story of "madcap ideas" (Mayne 2012: 53). Jewishness pulverizes its frontiers and dreams of a Fourth International, "an organization of members from all corners of the globe who were given this choice English surname as their first name" (idem: ibidem). What's in a surname? So Seymour Levine opens his gates to "a stream of bubbies and zeidehs" (*idem*: 54). Cross-cultural does not get necessarily transcultural. When a certain Williams shows up, the tremulous question emerges: "Was Williams a covert Jewish name" (*idem*: 57). But no: he is United Church, so a Seymour goy. Consternation! But living in a liquefied world hasn't eradicated the old Darwinian dangers and tactics. The survival of the fittest, which must be the God-chosen first name: "Let Seymours not disappear from the earth" (*idem*: 63). Indeed, such a disaster it would be! So better be transcultural for the sake of form, not of content. What if the form engenders certain contents? What if the summit of creation – in terms of baptismal deeds, like the paramount Seymourness – has to pay tribute to all cultures and ethnicities? If "Everything that had taken place in Europe was still a moment of another stage of the interregional system" (Jameson, Miyoshi 1998: 11), why could not Canada be the cradle and the melting pot of quasi-Jewish or world-dispersed Jewish values?

4. The Force of Preserving Memory-Ghettoes

Just the opposite of the cosmopolitanism and lavish details in his prose is Mayne's poetry. In it he focuses on the word sonnet, in which the form is whittled down to its essentials, – no room, consequently, for cultural interbreeding. Or am I wrong? 14 lines or better 14 points, as every line relies on only one word.

> The form attempts to season the traditional Western European verse with the Far Eastern flavor of a minimalist haiku. As in a haiku, the word sonnet attempts to ignite a moment – to generate a spark that echoes with the luminosity of deeper meaning (Mayne 2007: 7).

Suggestions are disposed now paradigmatically, not horizontally, in an attempt to compress – not to blend, not to gather – up to the point where essences ooze out in jets.

Even such a punctilious, non-geographical compression, emanates infinite possibilities. But Seymour Mayne writes also full-length poetry and, curiously enough, the longer the poems, the tiniest the world observed: "a vision of a tiny worm/ scalpelling away in the chest" (*There will be a time soon for tears*, in Mayne 1981: 9). It could be also a cultural approach: one culture missing, there is no risk of acculturation. Supplementary, culture is more and more socially informed and tends to be mixed up with civilization: "Social structures produce culture which, in turn, generates practices which, finally, reproduce social structures" (Rapport, Overing 2000: 2).

The poetic ego is incessantly lucid. Even in the throes of love, his spiritual eyes are like those "Angels of sight/ hovering over the prismatic dunes" (*Everywhere he gazed as if reading the air*; *idem*: 24). His flesh and blood will belong together to

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the origins. In poetry, Mayne looks much more attached to tradition. His lines seem carved "out of the monoliths of these temples/ out of the rock that is Jerusalem's flesh" (In *another time when bodies fell*; *idem*: 25).

With such an ethnic memory, forgetting would be a sin. The Jews collect their tragic remembrances from all times and spaces: "The anti-semite's three cornered hat?/ Or his triangular ears/ no cries penetrate/ so obtuse are they" (*Hamantaschen*; *idem*: 29). This is a far-flung interpretation of the triangular-filled-pocket-cookie. The "three-cornered hat" takes out minds back to Haman's pockets, or the poppy seed pockets.

5. Transgressors of Mentalities and Prejudices

Luckily enough, the biting, vigorous irony never seems to flinch. The condition of art, of postmodern art, is satisfied with the help of this relativizing technique: "David, self-professed holy man/ full of junk/ spiritual ambition blisters/ on your pocked semitic face" (*David*, *idem*: 35). Isn't irony the most efficient transgressor of every cultural border?

Cultures settle down and have the tendency to freeze in tight mentalities. This is the surest way to decline. Misreadings and poly-interpretations are not allowed in this ageing stage. Even memories get "stoned": "All/ those/ chipped/ broken/ rust-/ speckled/ grey/ street-/ kicked/ stones/ used/ to/ be/ birds" (*HOMELESSNESS*, in Mayne 2007: 12). The motif of stone-birds, like frozen remembrances, first appeared in Seymour Mayne's poetry in *Children of Abel*: "Ghosts lie in the garden, mossy and moldy under too many noisy/ seasons. The birds, stilled from flight, have become stones, white as ash – their eyes splinter into the sharp pebbles of pebbles" (*Garden*, in Mayne 1986: 16). It looks like by stilling birds-memories one is freer to cross boundaries towards the nephews of former enemies.

There is also a dissipation of time-borders with the help of the same fast-travelling machine: intercultural and cross-cultural approach. Mayne relaunched internationally the word sonnet. This simple, essentialized form of poetry is the result of a long-standing multi-angled tradition. One can reach such simplicity only through the assimilation of the specific tradition:

> The Greek monostichs and oracular poetry, the Latin epigrams of Martial and Catullus […], Hebrew psalmic incantations, […] Chinese-inspired concrete (and, of course, one could add imagist) poetry (Chris Tănăsescu, *Foreword* to Mayne 2014: 9).

In the vision of the same commentator (and translator into Romanian of this volume), the poet masters an "artful artlessness" in "trying to reach an uncolonized or even uninhabited landscape that allusively develops a prophetism of its own" (*idem*: 10–11). In the tiny space of these word sonnets, Mayne manages to alternate "profound contemplation with political and environmental concerns" (*idem*: 12). The vehicle used to achieve this cross-cultural overlap is provided with sophisticated facilities: "labyrinthine or cumulative syntax, ellipsis, indeterminacy and ambiguity, while his pervasive euphories are never mere ornamental" (*idem*: 13).

Many of such trips into semi-known remote areas-epochs are called *Ricochets*. The poetic sonar emits beams of scouting messages which will bump into niches containing subtle or forlorn pieces of information and then back to their source,

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conveying a surplus of vision: "Go/ find/ something/ in/ the/ dark:/ snow/ reflected/ off/ itself,/ a ricochet/ of/ illumination" (*idem*, *Ricochet*: 58).

Bracing up to trespass boundaries is not every time an exhilarating process. Sometimes such a venture into the history of a cosmopolitan ethnicity is rewarding only in terms of vigilance and suspicion: "Enjoy/ the/ dawn's/ enlightening/ armistice/ before/ our/ neighbors/ awake/ to/ plunder/ and/ despoil/ again" (*idem*, *Armistice*: 64).

6. The *Gemütlichkeit of* Multi- and Cross- Culturalism. Urbanized Miracles

Canada and especially Ottawa shaped themselves as enclaves of multi- and cross- culturalism, even if, for many years, long ago, this was a region destined to eugenic projects. In spite of his world-wide openness, the poet manifests a retractile temperament, taking distance from the dehumanizing contemporary urbanism. Everywhere he travels, he invests his feelings in the immutable, but suggestive nature: "Ottawa dozes amidst its leafy trees,/ gathers a green belt/ around its waist,/ sometimes breathes easy/ and tolerates a headache/ of glass towers" (*Ottawa Dozes Amidst Its Leafy Trees*; in Mayne 2005: 11).

The space of civilization which is open-heartedly visited is the temple, or the synagogue, where strict ritual blends with uncanny comparisons/hypotheses, as we have already seen:

> Nahit! nahit!/ – the chick peas,/ grabbed up in a swirl of hands/ and in the sanctuary/ the men crowding round/ the Torah bearers/ chant in response/ to the cantor's rising lead.// The a sudden shower of little bags/ chock full of raisins/ and almonds/ and eyes laughing/ down from the women's gallery (*NAHIT 0*; *idem*: 17).

In relation to the ritualized civilization is also the constant revisiting of Yiddish. Mayne holds dear the heritage of old new language of modern Hebrew in relation to English and disseminates it into his versatile creation:

> He whispers Judean syllables/ to confute her west coast cadences// He gives her no respite/ Even from between the lines/ of the *Post*/ he leaps up with a s*hin, vav,/ reish, lamed, yud* (*The Poet Shirley Kaufman and the Ghost of Eliezer Ben-Yehuda*; in Mayne 1986: 22).

Of course, to understand the quandaries of contemporaneity, the cross-cultural traveler ought to pay the toll to disasters past. But the eye of the poet's mind will be constantly seduced by the conditions of miracle. This fact denotes his religious grid of interpretation of the world: "How is it these files survived/ the enormous flashing sunlight that burst/ pod of skin, bone and speech?" *(idem; Hiroshima: Drawing by Survivor:* 34). Scanning the past does not imply to turn a blind eye to contemporary attempts at destroying the miracle. Everything is interconnected and the conclusion could be: "Everything that had taken place in Europe was still a moment of another stage of the interregional system" (Jameson, Miyoshi 1988: 11). Before achieving transcultural communication, people would need to find again their authenticity and get rid of a corporate mesmerization that forges noble perspectives:

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> The managers bemoan/ the imminent avalanche of profits/ someone must lead the nation/ and give direction to the young,/ they complain// The big men have begun/ to speak of sacrifice (*Sacrifice*; in Mayne 1986: 37).

7. Otherness and Built-up Identity

One reference to the title of the above-quoted volume is to be found in the volume *The Song of Moses and Other Poems*. Here we have the homonymous poem in which the ontological issue concerning humanity in general and Jewishness in particular is raised. In the previously quoted interview, Seymour Mayne does not offer solutions in respect of re-fashioning humanity, but he indicates the ontological conditions of a post-industrial Renaissance when he describes the "thriving diversity in Canada":

> We are not like many nation-states in Europe that consist of one of major ethnic group who set the agenda for culture, politics and public rituals. Right from the start we were a country founded on difference and the acceptance of difference – so we live with and often embrace cultural diversity and find the new world of the 21st century not so daunting to our sense of identity. Canadians are naturally cosmopolitan, given we have roots in over a hundred cultures and national experiences. We have learned to live with each other, with the Other, without resorting to civil wars or conflicts. We leave internal dissension and regional rivalries to the hockey rink; we play out our aggressions in the great sport in which we excel along with other northern peoples. Hockey is our football, our national pastime, and it funnels away our pugnacity (in the interview with Sbîrnea, no pagination).

Even the formalistic approach to Mayne's word sonnets has to concede to the world-scale absorption of traditions. Jewish spirit blends with so many other patterns:

> Concise and visual in effect, word sonnets are fourteen line poems, with one word per line, frequently allusive and imagistic, they can also be irreverent and playful. While informed by other short poetry forms as the Haiku, Mayne's word sonnets are deeply influenced by the Talmudic tradition of maxims, proverbs and images that instruct and inform everyday life (Sabine Huynh, translator of *Ricochet* in French – Open Access via University of Ottawa Press, www.press.uottawa.ca).

On the other hand, Canada is not only a heaven of cultural diversity, but also a conglomerate of cultures with a unique profile. Generosity and openness towards otherness are built-up in well-defined identity.

8. Exploring Archetypal Ancestries through Magic Voyages

When it comes to Jewishness, Mayne considers that Israel, The Promised Land, is the embodiment of the feminine principle. This complementary vision is the spark of vital inspiration: "I think every male poet, in one way or another, tries to rediscover and tries to root himself in the female principle" (*idem*: 17). Shekinah, the feminine emanation of God, triggers the necessity of establishing roots. Jews are so worldwide rooted that no one would suspect them of narrow-mindedness. To be more specific, they not only travel across continents, but also *camouflage* into the

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hosting cultures. They are able to borrow without being assimilated. This capacity makes them relaxed in front of interconnectedness. Their roots are plenty and they are able to un-root them and entrench them elsewhere without withering them, without losing their identity. That is why Mayne speaks about the Jews as being "the conscience of humanity" (*idem*: 20). When one possesses such a firm identity, one is not fearful of experimenting new identities. Otherness is more than tolerated: is tasted!

9. Multiricochets

One of the crucial conditions for accessing such cross-cultural awareness is a multilingual background: "Both my parents came from Eastern Europe, so I/m first-generation Canadian. As a child I spoke Russian and some Polish, but the language I grew up in was Yiddish" (*The Jerusalem Post Magazine*, Friday, June 8, interview with Aloma Halter 1990: 7). The *forma mentis* of a complex human being is the result of multiple valuable experiences. There are roots everywhere and even the most abstract ones, those related to spirit, are inescapable. For instance, Mayne admits to cultivating an affinity with the Native tradition in Israeli poetry and with the Native group (*idem*: 8).

The sediment carried and deposited by Seymour Mayne's literature is a spiritual landscape, extemporal but firmly localized in the archetypal memory of all Jews. It is the landscape of remembrance and it stimulates the imaginative part of memory:

> You went up and we almost forgot you./ We got busy down here collecting/ and sorting the coins and reluctant rings./ Up went the molten fire like our hearts/ ready to sing towards the wide Sinai sky (*DOWN HERE* – in Mayne 1992: 7)

This hard kernel is the ricochet point of all invasive experiences. Whatever comes anew is not rejected but projected into a repository of traditions and remembrances. But being aware of the salience of cross-cultural communication does not imply that one should indulge a utopian *Weltanschauung*. Communication is something fragile and many times un-authenticated. One should stay awake.

In various forewords to his books or in interviews, he raised again and again the issue of translational background, the interlocking of education-translation-creation. There are here strong issues of multilingualism, multiply-articulated identity, and trade between identities in a space relying on an enervated, heterogeneous scaffolding. The multiple cultural backgrounds spark communication problems or, better said, a hesitation in front of profound, less-conventionalized communication.

There is also the gap between individually constructed identity, kinship, and citizenship. All these instances have to be somehow pieced together without being assimilated or distorted, made inauthentic. In such a rich context, the role of literature seems to imply negotiation, improvement, critique, and enlargement.

The literary output between these coordinates testifies to a complex structure and contributes in an undisputable way to the building of a one-of-a-kind culture. Plurality, tolerance, and humour are the key words in this multilingual universe:

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> Growing up amidst many tongues in our immigrant neighbourhoods, I learned early the necessity of negotiating languages, translating spontaneously the give-and-take of family talk and debate. In the home, English and Yiddish vied for supremacy, on the Montreal street, English and French uneasily accommodated each other. At school from the earliest grades on, biblical, liturgical, and contemporary Hebrew entered daily usage. And then in high school, to add yet another lexicon, Latin became a challenge for a few years of instruction and parsing (Mayne 2017: 7).

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Abstract

Seymour Mayne's literary output is imbued with Canadian-fashioned multiculturalism. Additionally, an indefatigable search for his Jewish roots and Yiddish texts as preservers of ethnic memory involved his fictions and word-sonnets in a restorative approach. In spite of his academic profession, Mayne has a keen eye for landscape, nature and ecological implications. His subtlety resides in the mellow humor with which he welcomes every oddity related to tradition, religious rituals, cultural conflicts, and consumerism. My paper will analyze the impressive gamut of Mayne's multicultural understanding of the world and the versatile literary skills with which he reasserts his cultural and ethnic heritage under the cover of an ironic discourse.

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