Gaston Miron: Encountering Trauma in the Linguistic (De)colonization of Québec

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The Québécois poet Gaston Miron was the first Québec author to receive a state funeral when he died in 1996. This honour was particularly significant from a broader Canadian perspective given his close ties to Québec nationalist movements through his political and poetic engagement. He had spent much of his life involved in the broader cultural drama of Québec nationalism, a drama that for him was specifically linguistic and literary. In his essay "Le mot juste" ("The Right Word"), first published in 1987, Miron recounts his linguistic background upon arrival in the metropolis of Montreal after having lived in the Québec countryside, a background and experience that would develop into a full-blown linguistic trauma:

> Lorsque je suis arrivé à Montréal dans les années 1947-1950, me croyant en possession naturelle de ma langue maternelle, vernaculaire, écrite, et jeune aspirant écrivain la tête pleine d'idées sur la littérature, je ne me suis aperçu de rien. … Il allait de soi que [le français de Montréal et du Québec] était du vrai français, l'idée ne me venait même pas que cela ne pût en être. (Miron 234)

> When I arrived in Montreal in the years 1947-1950, believing I fully owned my native language, in its vernacular and written forms, and as an aspiring young writer with my head full of ideas about literature, I didn't notice anything amiss. [...] Of course [the French of Montreal and Québec] was real French; the idea never occurred to me that it could not be.[1]

Miron points out here that his naïveté upon arrival in Montreal was most obviously linguistic—though it was also more broadly a cultural naïveté about the language politics, class politics, and provincial politics of Québec and Canada. His "head full of ideas about literature," he thought that life in Montreal would introduce him to the literary world where he could live happily ever after writing and performing poetry. Born in 1928 in the small town of Sainte-Agathe-des-Monts in the Laurentides, Miron grew up around almost all native French speakers, speakers of a provincial Québécois French, with the specter of English displaced to the schools or far away in the cities. As a young man he moved to Montreal in 1947 and quickly became involved in Québec literature and politics. He helped found the publishing house L'Hexagone in 1953 and ran for political office in the federal elections of 1957. He lived through and participated in the Quiet Revolution that saw significant publicizing of the nationalist

agenda in Québec, both through politics and literature. In 1970, Miron was arrested without trial during the October Crisis, a time of government crackdown on Québec nationalists due to the kidnapping of government officials by an extremist party. Miron always fervently supported Québec nationalism and independence from Canada, but his political engagement became much less direct over the years, particularly after his arrest. His literary engagement remained constant, however, even though he actually published very little. His first collection of poetry, *Deux sangs*, was published in 1953, and in 1970, at the insistence of friends, he published his legendary work *L'homme rapaillé*. Apart from these two collections, he only published a couple of other collections of poetry and letters, with some posthumous works also being edited. The sparseness of Miron's published work raises two interesting points about the poet. First, although he was always producing poetry, he was largely an oral poet and considered his poetry best suited for public readings. Along with other Québec writers, he helped to reintroduce oral poetry (Ouédraogo 1218). And yet despite the fact that he published very little in his lifetime, he was widely known not only in Québec but also in the broader francophone world—a fact that explains the lavish and unprecedented honor of a state funeral. In the broader francophone context, Miron's life and work present an ideal case for studying the relation of postcolonialism and trauma studies. This article thus focuses its consideration of postcolonial trauma studies on the work of the poet Miron and the linguistic trauma to which it is witness. In his monumental work *L'homme rapaillé*, Miron applies the language of psychoanalysis and trauma studies directly to himself. The argument here is that his trauma is in fact a chief motor of his poetry, in particular his linguistic trauma.

One could pose the question of whether it is legitimate to speak of linguistic trauma, since trauma is first and foremost physical, at least in its most obvious forms of trauma from war and abuse. And trauma studies, as Kaplan points out, developed into a discipline after World War II and the Holocaust (1). Could any trauma be compared to that of the Holocaust? Certainly in qualitative terms, no experience can be compared to the trauma of war, rape, abuse, starvation, and the other myriad physical horrors that still plague large swaths of humanity. Nevertheless, trauma has a psychological aspect that is often the focus of trauma studies, and linguistic trauma fits well in this understanding of the term. Cathy Caruth points out that in the relevant literature since Freud "the term *trauma* is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind" (3). This "wound of the mind," she says in reference to Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*,

> is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that … is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor. (4)

When something as integral to identity as language is questioned and made the location of a traumatic event, a marring experience of anxiety and displacement takes place, twisting the experience and mind of the (de)colonized. This can be observed in numerous (post)colonial contexts, including that of Québec.[2]

Whether a traumatic event is primarily physical or psychological, its most long-lasting impact is on the psyche. Even primarily physical trauma is tied directly to psychological effects. In relation to the political use of fear of physical trauma to control populations, Lechner argues along these lines:

> Fear of physical harm and of economic insecurity is only the tip of an iceberg whose bulk is obscured. The hidden mass is anxiety: diffuse, apparently objectless fear that eats away at everything, crumbles hope, flattens emotions, and saps vitality—a cold that invades and paralyzes. It is said that a life not lived is a terminal illness. So we face death. Fear can kill us before we actually die. *People die of fear.* (26, emphasis added)

It is this anxiety, the obscured bulk of the iceberg, that linguistic trauma must refer to—as well as other non-physical traumas. In this study of Miron's work, it is manifestations of such anxiety that are examined—objectless fear eating away at everything, crumbling hope, flattening emotions, and sapping vitality. If these traumatic manifestations cannot always be tied to a single traumatic event (such as 9/11 or an experience of abuse), what they reveal are broad underlying psychological injuries due to unresolved and distressing sociopolitical issues, such as linguistic colonization through language politics and sociolinguistic discrimination. Lechner also points out that societies, particularly their governments and other ideology-producing institutions of power, can make use of negative human emotions to subjugate their members:

> The instrumentalization of fears is one of the principal mechanisms of social discipline. It is a strategy of depoliticization that does not require repressive means, except to exemplify the absence of alternatives. It suffices to induce a sense of personal and collective inability to have any effective influence on the public realm. Then the only alternative is to take refuge in the private realm in the hope (albeit vain) of finding minimal security in intimacy. (31)

This trauma is not always sudden and catastrophic, but it is real and debilitating. Miron's Québec fits perfectly with the "depoliticization" to which Lechner refers, for the provincial and national politics during Miron's lifetime usually avoided "repressive means," with the exception of the October Crisis as already mentioned. Miron was included in the "personal and collective inability" of Québecois nationalists and writers that grew to believe more and more over the years that they truly would not have an "effective influence on the public realm," at least not to the extent of achieving Québec's independence. Miron's trauma is thus collective, which, as Gilmore points out, is almost always true of trauma and "almost never exclusively personal; it always exists within

complicated histories that combine harm and pleasure, along with less inflected dimensions of everyday life" (31). When the poet writes in and about the French language, recounting his personal experiences, he is recounting his own linguistic trauma but also "finding minimal security in intimacy," to borrow Lechner's words again.

Miron's intimacy and private realm are those of a certain Québécois identity as he construes it. Of course, his poetry also breaks out of the bonds of fear and intimacy and seeks to reclaim legitimacy for that identity. The difficulty for him is specifically about the way that a certain type of society has construed his language, along with other parts of his identity, to make him feel inferior. His poetry, observes Dominguez, "often reflects a move from colonization to decolonization as well as the sublimated exilic state of an artist seeking to come home to his identity as a Québécois" (1013). In regard to postcolonial trauma studies, this issue of language and its connection to (de)colonization is extremely relevant in almost all conceivable situations, whether anglophone or francophone Africa, hispanophone South America, anglophone India, or francophone Canada. The central argument in this article, then, is that the anxiety and trauma examined in the literary output of one person is above all tied to his linguistic context and raises significant concerns about language and identity in a (post)colonial situation.

A Poetics of Trauma, a Traumatic Poetics

The poem-essay "Notes sur le non-poème et le poème" ("Notes on the Non-Poem and the Poem") lays out Miron's general approach to language and literature. Analysis of other key poems and essays also from *L'homme rapaillé* serves to tease out the language of trauma and at the same time the experiences that traumatized the poet and his emotional and discursive reactions to them. I will make a threefold argument regarding Miron's poetics: first, that he operates in a situation that can be properly considered a colonized context (if only from a linguistic perspective); second, that language is absolutely central in that situation (if only in Miron's thinking); and third, that the use of language through literature is Miron's best recourse to handling the situation.

As a starting point for this analysis, a key passage from the poem-essay "Notes on the Non-Poem and the Poem" can sum up Miron's poetics; for there, in an act both highly personal and public, he pours out his poetic soul:

> Je n'ai que mon cri existentiel pour m'assumer solidaire de l'expérience d'une situation d'infériorisation collective. Comment dire l'aliénation, cette situation incommunicable?" (Miron 133)

> I have only my existential cry to show my solidarity with the collective experience of a being made inferior. How to speak of alienation, this incommunicable situation?

This statement shows the inferiority complex that one Québécois man, doubtless representative of many, has developed, as well as Miron's poetic approach as a Québécois poet. In this latter aspect, the poem-essay expresses from several angles both the linguistic insecurities and literary objectives of the poet. Certain phrases from the citation provide keys to unlocking Miron's poetics.

Before discussing the uniquely *linguistic* aspect of the poet's trauma, it is essential to examine expressions of that general trauma and to define the "incommunicable situation" of which Miron speaks. That situation is one of being collectively "made inferior," or "collective inferiorization" to make a noun as in the French; and the action of making inferior is a key distinction to highlight, for Miron does not simply feel inferior, but rather, he feels that he has been *made* inferior (devalued and despised, looked down upon). For Miron, to live in Québec is already to be subjected to a sort of colonial experience. At the beginning of his poetic career, Miron left the countryside to discover the city of Montreal where he experiences overwhelming emotions of inferiority (including and extending beyond the linguistic realm). He there discovers the outside political control over so much of life in the province, leaving him and many like him as not quite fully accepted. This collective inferiority complex he had already referred to earlier in the same poem-essay, naming it "Ceci" ("This"). He addresses the problem first in prose: "Ceci, les conditions qui me sont faites et que j'ai fini par endosser comme une nature. Ceci qui sépare le dedans et le dehors en en faisant des univers opaques l'un à l'autre" (Miron 125; "This, the conditions that are made for me and that I ended up bearing as natural. This, which separates the inside and the outside by making them opaque universes to each other"). And then Miron switches to the poetic form to express the same bitter anxiety:

> Ceci est agonique
> Ceci de père en fils jusqu'à moi
> Le non-poème
> c'est ma tristesse
> ontologique
> la souffrance d'être un autre (125)

> This is agonal
> This from father to son all the way to me.
> The non-poem
> is my ontological
> sadness
> the suffering of being an other

This is the colonial situation, that of otherness, which no colonized person ever chooses but can be simply born into ("from father to son all the way to me"); it is the nature that Miron can only accept because it has been forced on him, making it all the more "agonal." In this excerpt the most significant word is *agonal*. Miron could have chosen the word *agonizing* ("angoissant"), but he chose a related word that is technically a medical

term. He thereby relates how his trauma reaches a level of physical suffering. In this terrible situation—not a sudden catastrophe, but a whole existence, whose nature and meaning for his life have only slowly dawned on him—the poet feels devalued (inferiorized) together with his compatriots. And it is important to remember the collective nature of this experience. As Kaplan says, "[i]t is hard to separate individual and collective trauma" (1)—an observation that highlights Miron's role as a poet. He is not only writing for himself but also expressing what many others like him—but who either *cannot* or *choose not* to express themselves publicly—have felt. This is the importance of literature in the postcolonial context—giving voice to the voiceless—not in a truly democratic way, but certainly in a representative way that shows solidarity around the suppressed or erased identity.

This theme of being an other—a colonized, marginalized, and despised subject—is recurrent in Miron's work. Another example in prose is an excerpt from his essay "Ma bibliothèque idéale" ("My Ideal Library"). He returns to his youth to show how early his anxiety started:

> Ma propre jeunesse fut marquée au coin de la pauvreté et de la faim, dans ce grand Montréal, et marquée aussi par le scandale à mes yeux d'un régime politique et d'une Église silencieuse, au point que j'en suis encore traumatisé. (Miron 189)

> My own youth was marked at the corner of poverty and hunger, in this grand Montreal, and also marked by, in my view, the scandal of a political system and of a silent Church, to the point that I'm still traumatized.

Later in the same essay he writes, now expressing what he still feels as an adult: "Je suis en face de ma propre solitude, je suis sur mes terres, avec mes pauvres souvenirs, l'amour resté … sans réponse, et ma peine" (Miron 190; "I look my own solitude in the face, I'm in my land, with my poor memories, love remains … unanswered, and my pain"). Regardless of the presence or absence of specific catastrophes, or even simply distressing events, these sentiments are expressions of deep-seated trauma. And while Miron represents a group of people with whom he shares his linguistic trauma, his writing is also deeply personal. As seen in these passages, he constantly uses the personal pronouns *I*, *my*, and *mine*. Although he never wrote an autobiography, his poetry is painfully autobiographical and provides rich texts for study in regard to the autobiographical concern central to trauma studies. Leigh Gilmore in particular has developed a significant theoretical structure within which to consider autobiographical material in trauma studies.[3] Gilmore points out that autobiography, including the memoir genre, is "a Western mode of production" that has nonetheless never been as stable as some critics have liked to think. Indeed, autobiographical texts have tended to be "formally unstable and decidedly multivoiced," resulting in "a critique, parody, or mimicry of the Western self" (Gilmore 2). This is precisely the literary and political effect of Miron's poetic voice. He mixes genres, as already seen, and allows himself to stutter poetically as he conveys his state of

alienation and colonization. His distinct appropriation of autobiography in his work allows him to make use of what Gilmore calls "autobiography's domain of first-person particularities and peculiarities … and to emerge through writing as an agent of self-representation" (9). Miron's collective sense with his fellow Québécois (at least those who speak primarily French) of estrangement does present the social side of his trauma, but his writing makes this trauma personal as well—he himself is an other; he himself does not fully belong.

The most vivid example of this feeling of being out of place and traumatized is highlighted in the poem "Le Québécanthrope" ("The Québécanthrope"), in which the poet tells the reader: "Oubliez le Québécanthrope / ce garçon qui ne ressemble à personne" (Miron 156; "Forget the Québécanthrope / this boy who doesn't look like anyone"). This is an extremely jarring note, the voice of a colonized who is struggling not to accept the colonial discourse that he is less than fully human. As all colonized people, he has been refused the right to his own identity with everything that this refusal entails. It is another francophone postcolonial writer, Aimé Césaire, who adds identity to the traditional triad of human rights:

> Chaque partie du monde a droit à la solidarité universelle. Il s'agit de savoir si nous croyons à l'homme et si nous croyons à ce qu'on appelle les droits de l'homme. À liberté, égalité, fraternité, j'ajoute toujours identité. Car, oui, nous y avons droit. (69)

> Every part of the world has the right to universal solidarity. The question is whether we believe in man and whether we believe in what we call human rights. To liberty, equality, fraternity, I always add identity. Because, yes, we are entitled to it.

The overall struggle to claim this right and his own identity is what causes Miron's trauma. His general anxiety finds its most settled expression in the primary concern of this article and an integral aspect of the postcolonial situation: language. Language is also central to trauma, as Gilmore explains: "The relation between trauma and representation, and especially language, is at the center of claims about trauma as a category" (6). In the case of Miron and linguistic trauma, this statement is doubly true, for Miron's work concerns not only the poet's self-representation but also the struggle that the poet must make to keep his language as his own and make central to his identity. In the poem "Les années de déréliction" ("The Years of Dereliction"), Miron himself specifies that this struggle is a significant part of his trauma:

> comment me retrouver labyrinthe ô mes yeux
> je marche dans mon manque de mots et de pensée
> hors du cercle de ma conscience, hors de portée
> père, mère, je n'ai plus mes yeux de fil en aiguille
>
> puisque je suis perdu, comme beaucoup des miens
> que je ne peux parler autrement qu'entre nous
> ma langue pareille à nos désarrois et nos détresses
> et bientôt pareille à la fosse commune de tous (Miron 95)

how do I find myself again maze oh my eyes
I walk in my lack of words and thought
outside the circle of my conscience, out of reach
father, mother, I no longer have my clear-sighted eyes

threading my loss, like many of mine
I cannot speak otherwise among us
my tongue like our confusions and our distresses
and soon-to-be similar to the common grave of all

The poet's "lack of words" can be read, on one level, as either a struggle to produce poetry or more significantly to use the French language in an authentic way. And yet this "lack of words" is even more than that, because it brings linguistic trauma to an even deeper level at the core of the poet's being. It is not only about the French language particularly: Miron is also attesting to a lack of thought, so traumatized is he by his situation. In this passage he speaks of physical organs (eyes, in particular, and tongue, which can also be understood as his language) that are not functioning properly and that keep him from expressing himself as he ought to. The poetic syntax is choppy and often opaque—common characteristics that appear throughout his poetry—as if to show that he truly is struggling to express himself. Miron appears to be writing in the intermediate stage between incoherent dream sequences and coherent speech—between "the unconscious language of repetition through which trauma initially speaks (flashbacks, nightmares, emotional flooding)" and "a conscious language that can be repeated in structured settings" (Gilmore 7). In another stanza of the same poem, Miron addresses the poem itself with an apologetic tone, seeking to explain himself and his difficulty with his language:

poème, mon regard, j'ai tenté que tu existes
luttant contre mon irréalité dans ce monde
nous voici ballottés dans un destin en dérive
nous agrippant à nos signes méconnaissables (Miron 96)

poem, my gaze, I tried to make you exist
fighting against my unreality in this world
here we are tossed in a destiny sent adrift
grasping our unrecognizable signs

Both in his poetry and through his political commitments, Miron focuses on this idea of the reclamation of his language. This effort can properly be called a decolonization of the language, for Miron titled one of his essays "Décoloniser la langue" (207; "Decolonizing Language"). If language is the crux of the colonial situation for him, it is because language myopia allows others to despise a Québécois such as he is. And the contempt comes from all sides: he does not speak English natively, so the English other despises him; he does not speak French like the French other, so what he speaks is viewed either as a twisted French or as not proper

French. This generalized contempt of Québec based on language difference leads to contempt for the people and to all sorts of terrible political conclusions, revealing the centrality of language in identity and culture. As Miron writes in "Notes on the Non-poem and the Poem," "La langue est le fondement même de l'existence d'un peuple, parce qu'elle réfléchit la totalité de sa culture en signes, en signifiés, en signifiance" (127; "Language is the very foundation of the existence of a people, because it reflects the totality of its culture in signs, in signifieds, in signifying"). Given this centrality of language to human existence, language's negation or failure must inevitably result in trauma, and once a human being undergoes trauma, language becomes a contradictory concept—according to Gilmore, "asserted as that which can realize trauma even as it is theorized as that which fails in the face of trauma" (7). Miron is highly successful in his intentional staggering between successful and unsuccessful linguistic representation of his trauma, both conveying it and not conveying it in this contradictory space described by Gilmore.

The poet's theorizing about language is not dissimilar to the ideas of another francophone writer in a different but still colonial context. Frantz Fanon, in *Peau noire, masques blancs* (*Black Skin, White Masks*), also highlights the centrality of language to culture and civilization:

> Parler, c'est être à même d'employer une certaine syntaxe, posséder la morphologie de telle ou telle langue, mais c'est surtout assumer une culture, supporter le poids d'une civilisation. (13)

> To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization. (*Black Skin* 17-18)

In Miron's case, using his language (not quite accepted as such by outsiders, or those who label him the outsider) is the problem. He describes himself as distressed by his attempt to "possess the morphology" and "assume the culture" that is associated with his language. Of course, he himself could be partially guilty for his situation, because the hostility against his Québecois French is a linguistic sentiment and prescriptivism that he appears to have unfortunately internalized in his own distaste for what he sees as his somewhat anglicized, and therefore perverted, Québecois French. Perhaps as a result of this internalized distaste for the language, and certainly because of his trauma, the poet comes across at times as almost out of his mind. In the poem "Monologues de l'aliénation délirante" ("Monologues of Wild Alienation"), Miron expresses his sense of being lost in the first two stanzas. He does not even know where he is. The subsequent stanzas then place him in well-known areas of Montreal where the location is well-defined but where he still cannot seem to find his own identity. As seen in the following stanza, he is lost in the face of cultural and linguistic otherness:

> or je suis dans la ville opulente
> la grande St. Catherine Street galope et claque

dans les Mille et une nuits des néons
moi je gis, muré dans la boîte crânienne
dépoétisé dans ma langue et mon appartenance
déphasé et décentré dans ma coïncidence
ravageur je fouille ma mémoire et mes chairs
jusqu'en les maladies de la tourbe et de l'être
pour trouver la trace de mes signes arrachés emportés
pour reconnaître mon cri dans l'opacité du réel (Miron 93)

So I'm in the opulent city
the great St. Catherine Street gallops and slams
in the neons of the Thousand and One Nights
me, I lie, walled in inside the cranial box
de-poeticized in my language and my belonging
confused and off-balance in my coincidence
I tear through my memory and my flesh
till I reach the diseases of the rabble and of being
to find the trace of my signs torn and taken away
to recognize my cry in the opacity of the real

The key phrases in regard to language in this excerpt are Miron's sense of being "de-poeticized in my language and my belonging" and his frantic search for "the trace of my signs." The first shows his sense of not only not belonging in his language but also of being nearly annihilated, not being able to use his language as he wishes. And so he desperately tries to find his (linguistic) signs that have been taken away from him by those who want to deny his full identity. But he has to recover his poetic identity; he has to cry out, in spite of the "opacity" of his existence, a cry of emotional and linguistic trauma. In a subsequent stanza he resorts to more language of disease and physical suffering to express the trauma again:

le délire grêle dans les espaces de ma tête
claytonies petites blanches claytonies de mai
pourquoi vous au fond de la folie mouvante
feux rouges les hagards tournesols de la nuit
je marche avec un cœur de patte saignante (93)

Delirium rains like hailstones in the spaces of my head
claytonias [Spring Beauties] little white May claytonias
why you at the bottom of the shifting madness
red lights the crazed sunflowers of the night
I walk with a heart like bleeding paw

The use of the word *aliénation* in the title of the poem is key, showing as it does how the poet views his situation and also the desperate, traumatic attempt to overcome that situation through poetic expression. To cite Fanon once again, this effort to overcome the trauma is a necessary step in reclaiming one's identity and fully expressing oneself and one's existence:

Avant de s'engager dans la voix positive, il y a pour la liberté un effort de désaliénation. Un homme, au début de son existence, est toujours congestionné, est

noyé dans la contingence. Le malheur de l'homme est d'avoir été enfant. (*Peau noire* 187-188)

Before it can adopt a positive voice, freedom requires an effort at disalienation. At the beginning of his life a man is always clotted, he is drowned in contingency. The tragedy of the man is that he was once a child. (*Black Skin* 231)

Finally, however, and not to leave the poet with nothing but his trauma and alienation, there is the positive engagement, a poetic engagement for Miron. In the face of his situation of collective inferiority, best exemplified and understood by the linguistic otherness of the poet, the only recourse he has is his poetry. Miron has nothing but the use of his language (regardless of whether others may consider it twisted or peculiar) to express himself in the world and to access and understand the world. He thus embraces it and uses it creatively. As Kaplan says, "[t]here is a need to transfer difference into something other than trauma" (23). That other for Miron is his poetry. And yet even the process of producing literature is traumatic, as attested to by the "existential cry" of the poet. That cry, as has already been noted, is his only way to show his solidarity in the "situation of collective inferiority." As shown above, this quote does reveal Miron's linguistic trauma, but it reveals more. It also summarizes the most important elements of Miron's poetics. If his is a poetics characterized and formed by the colonization of language and literature, and the poet feels hard-pressed to express himself as a poet, it is nonetheless a poetics that assumes a certain affiliation with that which is called "poetry" or "literature." Miron constantly fights in and against his situation in order to achieve the "poem." The way to do this is by synthesizing the poem and the non-poem:

Il appartient au poème de prendre conscience de cette aliénation, de reconnaître l'homme carencé de cette situation. Seul celui-là qui se perçoit comme tel, comme cet homme, peut dire la situation. L'œuvre du poème, dans ce moment de réappropriation consciente, est de s'affirmer solidaire dans l'identité. L'affirmation de soi, dans la lutte du poème, est la réponse à la situation qui dissocie, qui sépare le dehors et le dedans. Le poème refait l'homme. (Miron 134)

It is up to the poem to become conscious of this alienation, to recognize the man made deficient by this situation. Only he who recognizes himself as such, as that man, can speak of the situation. The work of the poem, in this moment of conscious reappropriation, is to affirm solidarity in identity. Self-affirmation, in the struggle of the poem, is the answer to the situation that dissociates and separates the outside and the inside. The poem remakes the man.

When Miron says, "I only have my existential cry," the philosophy he is expressing is that even the normal realm of literature has been removed or eliminated. Because of this elimination, his language and poetic expression turn between the poem ("literature") and the non-poem (that which is not fully accepted as literary) as expressed once again in his "Notes on the Non-poem and the Poem." The "This" of the poem (his sense of being made inferior) is the location of colonization; it is "ma

culture polluée" ("my polluted culture") and "mon dualisme linguistique" ("my linguistic dualism") to which he cannot cease to attest, a "This" that he cannot cease to name and rename over and over again (127). If he resorts to the non-poem at times, it is because the poem is culturally respected and he must therefore distance himself from it—"Le poème, lui, est debout / dans la matrice culture nationale / il appartient" (126; "The poem, it stands upright / in the matrix of the national culture / it belongs")—while the non-poem represents all that is suppressed and oppressed, and which he can more readily identify with in his most traumatic moments:

> Le non-poème
> ce sont les conditions subies sans espoir
> de la quotidienne altérité
> …
> c'est mon historicité
> vécue par substitutions
> …
> c'est ma langue que je ne sais plus reconnaître
> des marécages de mon esprit brumeux
> à ceux des signes aliénés de ma réalité (126)

> The non-poem
> is the conditions endured without hope
> of the daily otherness
> …
> it is my historicity
> lived by substitutions
> …
> it is my language that I can no longer recognize
> from the swamps of my foggy mind
> to those of the alienated signs of my reality

Paradoxically, the poet lives this non-poem and finds it excruciatingly difficult to make poetry, because "en Ceci, je suis un poète empêché, ma poésie est latente, car vivant Ceci j'échappe au processus historique de la poésie" (132; "In This, I am a thwarted poet, my poetry is latent, for in living This I escape the historic process of poetry"). He is also a mortified soul: "l'humiliation de ma poésie est ici / une humiliation ethnique" (132; "the humiliation of my poetry is here / an ethnic humiliation"). But he presses on in his struggle for expression and identity, recognizing that there is, after all, a public or a people receptive to his work—those who share in the situation of collective inferiority. So then he fights to achieve the poem and to leave the non-poem behind. It is noteworthy that he switches to the poetic form when he speaks of the public with whom he shares his broken and (supposedly) inferior identity:

> Seul [ce peuple] dans sa reprise
> peut rendre ma parole
> intelligible
> et légitime (133)

Only [this people] in its recovery
can make my speech
intelligible
and legitimate

To cite again Miron's essay "My Ideal Library," he views the very act of writing as identity formation and reclamation. It is his path to finding and affirming himself. "Je lis comme j'écris," he writes, "pour m'exprimer et me construire, et aussi, selon l'une de mes vieilles obsessions, pour m'identifier en m'avouant" (Miron 187; "I read as I write, to express myself and to construct myself, and also, in accord with one of my old obsessions, to identify myself through confessing myself"). Miron's use of literature—both the autobiographical and poetic modes—in this way accords well with Gilmore's point in the chapter "Represent Yourself": that "a first-person account of trauma represents an intervention in, even an interruption of, a whole meaning-making apparatus that threatens to shout it down at every turn" (13). Such an account and interruption are even more significant when the interrupter earns as much cultural capital and respect as someone as Gaston Miron.

Kaplan speaks of "'translating' trauma," by which she means "finding ways to make meaning out of, and to communicate, catastrophes that happen to others as well as to oneself" (19). Without ignoring the severity of physical and psychological trauma from actual catastrophes, it is still possible to emphasize the traumatic nature of much of the social context of postcolonial societies. All trauma, wherever it may fall on the qualitative scale, "can never be 'healed' in the sense of a return to how things were before a catastrophe took place, or before one witnessed a catastrophe; but if the wound of trauma remains open, its pain may be worked through in the process of its being 'translated' via art" (Kaplan 19). It is this work of "translation" of his linguistic trauma to meaning and to a reformation and reaffirmation of his identity in which the Québécois poet Gaston Miron engages creatively.

Conclusion: Miron and Postcolonial Trauma Studies

This study comes full circle with applications from trauma studies to Miron's poetics and, primarily, applications to postcolonial studies from Miron's articulations of trauma. In regard to the former, Miron clearly manifests a linguistic trauma. In addition, this interplay between the poetics of a Québécois and the foci of trauma studies permits the questioning of certain postcolonial juxtapositions and priorities. For example, a Québécois poet is in the highly uncertain position between East and West, related to both colonizer and colonized. By whom is Miron colonized? The French had colonized the territory, but they would be his ancestors. Then Québec passed into British possession. Are the British,

and now the Canadians, the colonizers? Miron's death and state funeral present an interesting case study with regards to colonization and the poet's own sense of being colonized. Since the province of Québec had for several decades aggressively pushed its language and sociopolitical agenda, as McGimpsey points out: "The traditional insularity of the *Québécois* people has not seemed far removed from an exploitable xenophobia, a resource which the province's politicians are rarely loath to dip into." Miron's involvement in the nationalist movement of Québec also implicated him in that (at least apparent) xenophobia, and when at his death he received the first state funeral, the minorities of Québec questioned why a promoter of an "ethnically exclusive vision" would receive that honor. Thus one sees the difficulty of speaking of clean East-West distinctions, or even colonizer-colonized, in a postcolonial analysis of Miron's work.

In addition to these questions of territorial colonization, conquest, and imperialism, what of language? Clearly Miron views his language as colonized, but by whom? His angst is expressed chiefly against those of his own country who look down on both his French and English; but many in his situation may feel just as distraught when comparing their French to that of other native francophone peoples, particularly those of France. Is this a mere intellectual, linguistic colonization? If it is, it appears to be, at times, at least partially self-inflicted or self-perpetuated. Even Miron, in accepting his language and reconstructing himself, eschews the contortions and perversions that English has brought to his French. And yet, that is how language works: one language affects another, and vice versa. Why despise those influences, even if they make his French (and English) "different"? Developed quite often in historical contexts where one language is regarded as inferior to another, linguistic terminology enables us to talk "down" about other languages—consider terms such as *creole*, *dialect*, or *tribal language*, for example, that all too easily take on a pejorative connotation. It is much more helpful to think of human language as a capacity as fluid and unstable in itself, and languages as simply manifestations of that capacity.

What is clear from this study is that in specific sociolinguistic contexts language can cause significant trauma, understood as a mental and psychological injury resulting not only in distress but also in a questioning of identity. Such linguistic trauma could occur in any given context but is probably most important in colonial and postcolonial contexts where one language is viewed as inferior or even as a twisted "sub"-language. Sometimes the trauma and the negative view of the language may be internalized and even perpetuated by those who experience the trauma of "collective inferiority." Miron's situation is extreme to the extent that his reaction is extreme, but linguistic trauma could be present anywhere, even in the absence of oppressive cultural and linguistic politics as in Québec. Whether a bilingual child growing up in an environment that favors one language over another, a colonized subject forced to use the colonizer's language (whether through direct

coercion or the pressure of social advancement), or a national minority whose regional language is sidelined and maligned, all of these (potentially postcolonial) subjects experience a similar trauma. In their account of the linguistic trauma of the French poet Paul Celan, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub summarize Celan's struggle to "reappropriate the language which has marked its own exclusion" (27). His context is very different from Miron's (he insisted on writing his poetry in German, saying that he did "not believe in bilingualness in poetry," and yet this meant he had to use the language of his parents' murderers), but the struggle to find identity through self-expression and to reclaim his language is identical.

Given these observations, the most practical application to postcolonial trauma studies is Miron's own response to his situation—one similar to Celan's response. The only way to handle linguistic trauma is to respond to it in kind—to produce, represent, create. The only strategy, which is similar to proposals by Gilmore and Kaplan as shown above, is to face the trauma, and to represent oneself, to "translate" the trauma (give it meaning), and to work through it by addressing its defining element, in Miron's case with language itself. That is what *L'homme rapaillé* is, before it is anything else, whether a collection of poetry, or a celebration of a certain identity, or a celebration of other themes of human existence. The final and simplest example that one can give is the title of the book. The word *rapaillé* (from the verb *rapailler*) comes from Québecois French. Miron reclaims his identity by putting on the cover of his monumental work a term closely associated with his linguistic identity. In addition, the meaning of the word is significant. It means "reconstituted," "repaired," or "reassembled." He, the poet, is this reassembled man. He had to gather himself together and reclaim his identity. In the quest for identity, and the struggle to reconstitute himself, he had to reclaim the poem (literature) for himself, even if it was in constant tension with the non-poem (his experience of being made inferior). But it made him a new man, recomposed. This is the man-poet who dared to confront his alienation. Miron's poetics, nothing at first but an existential cry, launches now into the swamp of colonization, contempt, rejection—to escape and never again to be alienated, colonized, or incommunicable, but assuming his full identity, a man *rapaillé*. Thus, "*L'homme rapaillé* … attempts to arouse a collective sense of pride by celebrating a national language" (McGimpsey).

Lechner speaks to this strategy in his discussion of politicized fear, but it is applicable in the case of any attempt at overcoming trauma: "People can learn … to become less susceptible to ambiguous and threatening situations and to modify their perceptions. Concretely, to assuage their fear of the other, to be strange and different, and to accept uncertainty are conditions of freedom from the other" (33). This the poet did. By finally taking his language and identity as his own, accepting them in spite of opposition and mockery, Gaston Miron became less susceptible

to the ambiguous linguistic context he lived in and learned even to be strange and different.

Notes

1. All quotations come from the complete 1996 edition of *L'homme rapaillé* unless noted otherwise. In addition to six essays published at different times, this edition includes all of the poems that eventually made up the collection; they are essential for understanding Miron's view of his sociolinguistic context. All translations from French are mine.

2. Other examples include the personal and academic analyses of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o in Kenya (*Decolonising the Mind*, 1986) and Chris Uchenna Agbedo in Nigeria ("Linguicist Ideology and Linguistic Trauma in Nigeria: Issues and Challenges," 2010); plenty of other examples exist in Africa, the Americas, India, etc. An example not tied to a geographical specificity is that of feminism; speaking to the francophone context, Fleischman points out the linguistic trauma to all involved in political changes to the French language to lessen sexism and update the so-called *bon usage* ("The Battle of Feminism and Bon Usage: Instituting Nonsexist Usage in French," 1997).

3. Cf. Gilmore, *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation* (1994), *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* (2001), as well as Ashley, Gilmore, and Peters, *Autobiography and Postmodernism* (1994).

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