

THE TIME IS NOW OR NOT YET:  
ATTITUDES TOWARDS EXPLORATION  
IN THE FRENCH AND ENGLISH  
CANADIAN NOVEL

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Alice Chown wrote near the end of her book, *The Stairway*, that, "Life offers one great opportunity, simply to test it and discover for ourselves what is true, true for us, that is our limit"<sup>1</sup> and to a great extent that sums up what many of us do — test and accept or reject the many beliefs, customs, and laws of the society into which we were born and must live. If we test and accept, as the majority do, we settle into our niche and live more or less comfortably, but if we test and reject, then life becomes a voyage of exploration and discovery, fraught with all the dangers and promising all the rewards and disappointments that the physical exploration of this continent once offered our ancestors. Since in the physical sense most of our frontiers have already been explored and mapped, there remains only for us to explore the limits within ourselves and our society, and to push back whatever boundaries we find irksome, whatever restraints that interfere with the fulfillment of self. We are fortunate in the time in which we live because it is a time in which such exploration is in vogue, much as physical exploration was in vogue when our country was built.

For the individual in Canada in the first quarter of this century, such personal exploration of values and rules was difficult. The individual, from infancy, was kept in bondage by the multiple, vertically superimposed layers of authority — parental, religious and moral, and governmental. All the institutions to which the child belonged, willy-nilly, forced him to conform, and all these institutions were closely interwoven, and mutually supportive, teaching and enforcing basically the same set of values and rules. The father governed the family, and his authority was supported by the teaching of the church and by the law. The child went to church, where he

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<sup>1</sup>(Boston: Cornhill, 1921), p. 203.

was taught to fear and obey the Heavenly father and the earthly father and to be obedient to all those set in authority over him. The school, whose curriculum was often decided by ministers and priests, was run by teachers who stood *in loco parentis*, and were accountable to parents and the government. The government, the final giver of civil and criminal law, was elected by the god-fearing parents, and was responsible to them for the maintenance of order based on the values taught and enforced by the father, the church and the school. Through the church and public morality, the very books the child read, the games he played, the clothes he wore were dictated to him.

It was a powerful system for the inculcation and enforcing of a system of values and rules designed to make a population governable. Only the strong or the foolish rebelled and set out to push back the frontiers by flouting the accepted, to free themselves, and to serve as examples to others in their search for freedom. But such has been the growing force of this desire for self-fulfilment that in the present day every child is enjoined by almost every institution of which he is a part to choose, from the supermarket of the world, the self that suits him, the style that flatters his ego, the goals which offer him the most satisfaction.

Unhappily there are those segments within our society which have encountered and are still encountering great resistance from entrenched authority in their search for self-expression. The two groups whose groping towards freedom have been most obvious in our society are women and the Quebec nationalists. In this paper I propose to treat the search by these two groups for self-expression, as reflected in two progressions of three novels written over a period of approximately fifty years.

The first progression of three novels dealing with self-fulfilment for women contains the following: *The Stairway*, by Alice Chown, published in 1921; *Shackles*, by Madge MacBeth, published in 1926; and *The Diviners*, by Margaret Laurence, published in 1974. The second group, in French, and dealing with French-Canadian nationalism, is made up of *Marcel Faure*, by J.-C. Harvey, published in 1922; *La Chesnaie*, by Rex Desmarchais, published in 1942; and finally *Trou de mémoire*, by Hubert Aquin, published in 1974 and translated as *Blackout* by Allan Brown,

*The Stairway*, by Alice Chown, is the story of a woman's personal search for freedom carried on over the first two decades of

this century. Briefly, the narrator was an unmarried woman near middle-age, who had given her youth and strength to the care of her mother. After her mother's death, she was faced with constructing a new life for herself. Death had removed the first level of authority and responsibility, the family, and she immediately escaped physically from the stereotype her society had of her by leaving her home and seeking anonymity in travel.

Possessed of a mind shaped by years of selfless service to others, she gravitated towards helping others gain the freedom she had gained. She espoused causes, especially the liberation of women, and the improving of social conditions. She encouraged women in industry to achieve wage parity with men, and advised them how to escape the degrading treatment meted out to them by the men in authority over them. She talked, taught, and wrote about the inequality of women before the law and of their slavery in marriage. She organized groups of women for the discussion of their problems. She studied, travelled and tested various styles of community living, always remaining on the fringe and moving rapidly from one cause to another, by her own admission depriving herself of lasting human relationships in order not to compromise her freedom.

All through the book there is an obvious dichotomy between theory and practice, between the ideal and the real. This dichotomy is nowhere more clearly illustrated, and the narrator's frustration nowhere more obvious, than in the two following passages:

As we have chained the lightning, prevented its doing the harm it formerly did, so shall we chain sex. Today men and women, especially women, are suffering from the suppression of feeling. There are women who realize that sex is a natural function and are seeking their own expression for it without regard to marriage. Ultimately, the number of self-supporting women who do so will increase. (p. 77)

But, when other women of her time were asked to consider the practical application of this advanced theory, they balked completely:

They were ready to discuss any novel, any romantic treatment of the sex question simply as a product of the author's imagination, but the actual question was as unreal for them as any child's fairy tale. The one criterion by which they disposed of every phase of the sex problem was, That would be immoral. (p. 77)

The narrator strikes out at monogamic marriage, but fears the resultant promiscuity. She praises a man liberated enough to wish to live with a financially independent woman outside of legal marriage, but suggests that another woman than herself try the experiment. She praises the arrangement by which a wife, not strongly sexual, allows her husband a yearly holiday with a mistress, but is found out by another feminist: "How can you accept his ideas about sex freedom when you believe that sex relations must be limited to reproduction?" (p. 114). She rejects an offer of marriage, although she wants a child: "To marry any man I know seems too high a price to pay for a child" (p. 112).

The narrator achieves freedom, but at the price of denying herself almost everything that the world has to offer in the way of sexual relationships. And that, according to her own lights, is a large price to pay. The book was a very advanced one for its time, and was prophetic to a great degree. It was, however, a theory waiting for a more receptive moral and social climate.

The second novel, *Shackles*, 1926, by Madge MacBeth, tells of a wife's attempt to escape from the restrictions of marriage to a husband who wishes her to cater to his every whim rather than to develop as an individual. The heroine, an increasingly successful writer, is constantly kept from her writing by her husband's petty, irritating demands. He tells her plainly that happiness for the individual consists in service to others, a belief well-supported by the church which he attends regularly, as well as by all the other husbands he knows. Within a small circle of literary friends, she, however, finds examples of couples who reverse these traditional roles — the wife earning the money and the husband taking care of the irksome details of day to day life. She also finds, within this small circle, an attractive man who constantly pressures her to enter into a similar arrangement with him. Just as her mind is about made up to run away with this man, her husband, thoroughly confused by his wife's disturbing attitudes, is seduced by a travelling lady evangelist, thus presenting the wife the perfect opportunity to escape. The new land beckons, but, when the husband confesses all, he also adds that now he values her virtue more than ever and that he despises the other woman, who has fallen from grace. As a capping irony, he explains that by staying she will be further improved by having an endless opportunity to exercise the God-like virtue of forgiveness. The poor, confused wife can only nod her agreement to this request,

since she has lately found that the attractive other man has been exhibiting tendencies disturbingly like those of her husband. "Better bear those ills we have . . .," thinks she, and girds herself to carry on the endless fight for time and space for herself. Her final cry appears in one of her novels:

Complete emancipation for women, . . . is a vision of the future. It can only come when they are happier causing pain that relieving it, or, if that statement be too strong, when their own happiness is of greater moment than that of the men who have undertaken to protect them.<sup>2</sup>

Madge MacBeth's heroine tries to put into practice part of the theory which Alice Chown has written into *The Stairway*, but it is an abortive attempt, because the heroine is not prepared to face the consequences of her own act, nor is the other man sufficiently liberated from belief in stereotyped male and female roles to allow her real freedom. Indeed, the time was not yet.

Margaret Laurence has both lived and written her own liberation and fulfilment, and that of her greatest fictional character, Morag Gunn. Both author and fictional character are the natural inheritors of the legacy of Alice Chown and Madge MacBeth, and both have benefited by the changes in attitudes toward individuality, women, and marriage which have taken place in the almost half century between the appearance of *Shackles* and *The Diviners*.

Morag Gunn, in *The Diviners*, achieves those things she most desires in life during her physical and spiritual odyssey — her physical freedom from a stultifying marriage; her own child, proof of her femininity and the fruit of her right and desire to fulfil her biological function; her own individuality made up of her past and her present; and finally the hard won, carefully defined and fiercely defended living space to be the writer she had to be.

One can only realize the magnitude of this achievement, and the nature and extent of the change in attitudes and stereotypes in Canada, when one considers that Morag Gunn has done, in the novel, what was, in the past, the male prerogative exclusively. She has been the aggressor, moving when the weight of authority pressed too heavily upon her; she chose, she tested what each successive situation offered, until she did what in human terms has always been

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<sup>2</sup>(Ottawa: Graphic, 1926), p. 324.

a male thing to do — by the fruits of her own labour bought land, established her home and raised her child on her terms, made the little community accept her life style as the only viable one for her. Her final resting place is imperfect, a compromise, as all human solutions to human problems are compromises, but there sits Morag Gunn, alone, almost happy, aware of the imperfections of her solution to her problem, but content that it was the best she could have done, almost happy, as happy as anyone could be, weighed down by her Scottish ancestry, by the tragedy of Jules Tonnerre and his Metis family, by the impending ecological disaster, by loneliness, all of which is so well expressed in the old Scottish war cries and mottoes taught to her by Christie Logan. It must be pointed out that Morag Gunn has the advantage over those who came before, for her the times are propitious. The ground-swell of self-expression for all is rising, just as the ground-swell of exploration and immigration rose in the past to define Canada's boundaries and fill its empty spaces.

The situation of Quebec within Confederation, at least as perceived by Quebec nationalists, has often been likened to an unhappy marriage, in which Quebec is the wife oppressed by multiple levels of power, moral, physical and legal, forced to remain joined in a joyless union from which there is no divorce, the joyless union described by Hubert Aquin, in *Trou de mémoire* as "copulatory federalism." English Canada is represented as the traditional Victorian household tyrant, wielding the absolute authority, upheld by all the institutions, demanding obedience, demanding to be catered to, supported, and flattered by Quebec in the role of "ego masseuse," as Madge MacBeth described wifehood.

Since the middle years of this century, however, changes in attitude have been taking place, particularly within Quebec. The mental climate which accepts more and more challenges to absolute authority is rife here as elsewhere in the world. The individual becomes progressively more important and has the sympathy of growing segments of the population. As these individuals and groups of various kinds force their societies to re-think their rules and standards, long accepted taboos and outdated laws disappear.

Anyone familiar with the Canadian novel over the past sixty years will be aware that it reflects very clearly the demands for change which are continually being made by our people. These two groups especially, women and the French Canadian nationalists,

have been particularly vigorous in exploring various possibilities for change and improvement, and they have sought to throw off "domination" and take power in order to have self-determination.

Women in Canada always profit in their struggle for equality from the efforts of their sisters in the United States, where many of the patterns for our opinions and styles come from. In the United States an unsatisfactory marriage has, for some time, been relatively easy to escape from. The force of community morality is often entirely missing in the heavily populated areas which foster anonymity, and it is these very large centers which set patterns. The authority of the family has lessened, as has the authority of the church and the school. Without these institutions to reinforce the old laws and beliefs, the way is open for the acceptance of rapid change. Really only the law, the final authority, remains, and it reflects in the end, the will of the majority.

In Quebec society, a similar set of changes has been taking place. The urbanization of the province, and the "quiet Revolution" have had their effect on family, on education, and on the influence of the Church. The individual, as he matures, no longer has to fight the weight of these multiple layers of interlocking authority, and in a mental and political climate, both at home and abroad, in which challenges to authority are progressively more acceptable, he can openly state his preference for a free Quebec without being punished by an offended father, condemned by his priest, or ostracized by his conservative community. Emerging nations all over the world serve as examples of what can be done to throw off outside authority. Unfortunately the Quebec nationalist can never hope to gain much public support from our immediate neighbour to the south, in whose memory there still looms the spectre of the Civil War and the near revolution of the black segment of their population. Neither can they hope for an easy divorce, since husband-Canada does not seem to wish it yet, and he still has considerable power and the support of a large segment of community opinion.

Let us look at a progression of three perceptive novels which reflect clearly the aspirations and disappointments of the Quebec nationalist in relation to the changing situation. These novels, *Marcel Faure*, by Jean-Charles Harvey; *La Chesnaie*, by Rex Desmarchais; and *Trou de Mémoire*, by Hubert Aquin, were published respectively in 1922, 1942, and 1974; so they cover roughly the same time spread as do the novels concerning women.

Marcel Faure<sup>3</sup> is a reasoned, low-keyed attack on the whole of Quebec society and on Confederation. Through his central figure, Faure, Harvey points out those various levels of authority and vested interest which have prevented the French Canadian from taking control of his own destiny. To Faure, an early exponent of the quiet revolution, one must first establish honest government and Quebec-controlled financial institutions from which entrepreneurs, trained in the necessary managerial skills, can borrow capital to build up local enterprises whose products will compete on world markets. To keep their products competitive, these enterprises will have to adopt the system presently used by Japanese industrial giants, that of caring for their employees from the cradle to the grave. In return for their loyalty these labourers will share the profits, and have access to the most progressive education for their children, the best available housing, and a package of entertainment and culture designed to inculcate their own set of values and opinions.

Faure succeeds in his own individual enterprise by putting into operation all the various rules he invents, and his success in the novel should serve as a shining example to others to do likewise. He achieves his individual "freedom," like the narrator in *The Stairway*. The whole novel, like *The Stairway*, is a compendium of problems and solutions for the individual in his search for self-expression, and it partakes of the same reasonable tone. It is perhaps the very reasonableness which blunted the force of Harvey's attack.

J. C. Harvey later launched a vitriolic broad-side against his society in *Les demi-civilisés* (1934). His society reacted instantly against him by taking away his position as Editor of *Le Soleil*, Quebec City's largest newspaper, and assigning him to limbo for a long period. Public opinion and authority were against him. The time was not yet.

The second of the nationalistic novels, *La Chesnaie*<sup>4</sup> by Rex Desmarchais, could be described as a reaction against the treatment meted out to Harvey. If Quebecers themselves are not ready to accept criticism and peaceful change within, then the revolutionary of *La Chesnaie* will take his fellow citizens by their noses and lead them to freedom. Obviously the reasoned, elitist approach has failed, as has the verbal broadside. Only one approach is left — violence and revolution. All through the novel there is a sharp contrast maintained

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<sup>3</sup>(L'imprimerie de Montmagny, 1922).

<sup>4</sup>(Montreal: L'arbre, 1942).



between the attitudes of the mild, cultured writer and the violent revolutionary. The revolutionary dominates the writer until the very end of the novel, but it is the climax which indicates the author's message to his readers. Alain Després, the writer, allows Hughes Larocque, the revolutionary, to take control of his life and fortune at a time when Larocque has already built the framework of his revolutionary army, has already established his network of spies in every government department, and is on the point of publishing his own newspaper for the dissemination of nationalistic material and government scandal. The publication of the material gathered by Larocque's spies is meant to coincide with a wave of nationalistic sentiment which was mounting as the fear of possible involvement in another world war grew in the late thirties. The plan is perfect, the timing is impeccable, the execution is faultless, but the revolution aborts because the society is not ready to accept such a radical change.

The weight of authority quickly presses down on Larocque. Weaknesses within the organization develop under pressure. Members fear violence. Alain Després, the writer, wishing to avert harm to his fiancée's family should governmental scandals become public, deserts the cause. His sister, once Larocque's mistress, and now married to an influential English-speaking Montrealer, shoots Larocque in a quarrel over the scandals, and the entire organization collapses for lack of dedication on the part of its members. At the end of the novel, Després, speaking to his brother-in-law, Brown, says that, even though the man is dead, the idea lives on. The message is the same as that given the reader in *Shackles* by Madge MacBeth: the time is not yet.

The third novel in this progression, *Trou de mémoire*, by Hubert Aquin, or *Blackout*, as the translation by Alan Brown is called,<sup>5</sup> was written thirty years after the appearance of *La Chesnaie*. As in a comparison of *Shackles* and *The Diviners*, *Blackout* is vastly superior in every way to *La Chesnaie*, infinitely richer, the product of a mind influenced by the attitudes current in Quebec and the world in the middle Seventies. It is the product of a mind freed of all of the restrictions of the past except one — the restriction which the central figure attempts to throw off — the burdensome yoke of Confederation.

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<sup>5</sup>(Toronto: Anansi, 1974).

*Blackout* is a novel with two plots in the beginning, involving two pairs of lovers in widely separated settings, Montreal and the Ivory Coast. Disparate settings aside, there are many similarities between the two couples. In Montreal, Pierre X. Magnant is a drug-taking pharmacist and a revolutionary orator, whose mistress, Joan Ruskin, is an English-speaking bio-chemist who is coming to accept her lover's political beliefs. In Africa, Olympe Ghezze-Quenum is a pharmacist who samples his own wares and a revolutionary orator. He has a white, English-speaking mistress, Rachel Ruskin, sister of Joan. The time is just before Expo 67, and a few bombs are exploding in Quebec. Perhaps the time will be soon. The population of Quebec is more receptive to the idea of change. Africa is vibrating to the call for freedom from the white man's domination.

In a complicated plot, rich in allusion and symbolism, Magnant plans and executes the symbolic ritual murder of Rachel, his English mistress, only to find that his attachment to her had been based on real love. His mind, under the influence of multiple doses of various drugs, conceives a scheme whereby he can confess this perfect crime and go unpunished. He will write his confession in the form of a novel, pretend to kill himself, and assume a new identity as a book publisher, the literary executor of Magnant.

In Africa, Rachel hears of her sister's death and suspects Magnant of murdering her. Magnant, meanwhile, has become so deranged through drugs and grief that he comes to Africa seeking Rachel as a substitute for her dead sister. Rachel and her black lover flee to Switzerland to escape his unwelcome attentions, but Magnant follows and, catching Rachel alone on the street after dark, rapes her. Rachel, like her sister Joan before her, falls prey to Magnant's sexual charms, and when her black lover gives her massive doses of "truth serum" she confesses to having been wildly aroused by the experience. The two decide to come to Montreal, using Expo as the excuse to enter the country. Rachel contacts Magnant, in his new identity as book publisher, and blackmails him into giving her lover money to start a pharmacy in Montreal. Olympe guesses who the publisher really is and begins to blackmail on his own. Magnant kills him and then dies himself. In the final pages of the novel, we see Rachel, pregnant from the "rape" in Switzerland, occupying the role which Magnant had assumed — literary executor to the murderer of Joan Ruskin. She has changed her name to hide her old identity, and now speaks only French with an Irish accent, and is awaiting the

rebirth of Pierre X. Magnant's political ideals in the form of their revolutionary child of the future. The time is still not yet.

Morag Gunn, the heroine of the odyssey in *The Diviners* makes a false start in her search for fulfilment because of her youthful romanticism, but finding herself unhappy under the domination of her husband, assumes the male prerogative, that of power and decision, and leaves her stultifying apartment to grope her own way through the world. She chooses the male who will father her child, but chooses not to marry him; she has her child alone, supports her alone, and searches for a home for this modern family. Before she can find a permanent home, she must first explore her past to find an historical identity, and having done this, she finally puts down roots in the country after the death of her last tie with her childhood, Christie Logan. She does what her ancestors did before her, becomes a pioneer. She stakes her claim, and the community around her must accept her as she is — a woman with a child, but no husband, working to support her family. She is accepted by her community because the time is ripe for such acceptance. Many of the moralizing attitudes of days gone by have disappeared. Members of her adopted community have experienced similar searches and can identify with her attitudes. They have had their own wars with urbanism and stereotypes and have chosen individuality and freedom from convention.

Although Pierre X. Magnant and his African counterpart fight hard for political freedom, they find that their relationship with their "white-English colonizer-husband" is still too strong — there still exists enough love and confusion of purpose to keep the relationship going for a few more years. The time is not ripe. Public opinion has still not reached the stage of majority acceptance of their alternatives, and the institutions of their respective societies are still ready and able to punish them for challenging authority. But, as Desmarchais pointed out in the Forties, and as Hubert Aquin repeated in the Seventies, individuals who espouse ideas may die or be silenced, but their ideas, if powerful enough, will rise again in a more acceptable form and will, in the natural evolution of attitudes, find acceptance, as Morag Gunn's new arrangement has been finally found acceptable.

It has not been easy for her; she has had to hurt someone whom she had loved to kill a relationship that was narrowing her horizons to four walls and one bed; she has had to face an unknown

future; she has had to face the consequences of her own acts, to stand, as Christie Logan might have expressed it, bare-assed on the "Ridge of Tears," yelling into the cold wind, "Gainsay Who Dares."

It is equally difficult for the Quebec nationalist, who must fight against a stronger partner for her freedom of expression, who must finally take full responsibility for her own decisions, and who must hurt someone who has loved her, and still does love her. It is perhaps more difficult for Quebec to finalize the divorce, since she must, in a sense, continue to inhabit the same house with her husband after the divorce. So, there the question still hangs.

In the novels I have discussed, the attitudes towards exploring values in the search for freedom of expression follow very closely the attitudes of the society in which the authors lived and wrote. What the earlier women authors advocated has come to pass in the real world, and what the Quebec nationalists continue to advocate in their novels, has resurfaced, as the authors predicted, and has gained wider acceptance at least in its own society, where many now seem tentatively in favour of the final divorce or at least a legal separation. But the time, real and fictional, is not yet.

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