

QUEBEC FICTION IN ENGLISH DURING THE 1980S: A CASE STUDY IN MARGINALITY¹

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I

The unique position of Quebec writers in the English language² and the peculiarities of the fiction they have been publishing during the 1980s are best understood in the light of recent socio-political and cultural changes within Quebec and in Canada as a whole. Caught up as no other English-Canadian writers have been caught up in the maelstrom of change, and living as no other English-Canadian writers live in a society with a French face, these writers have produced a body of work quite distinct in some ways from other contemporary English-Canadian fiction.

Much of my thinking about this writing is inspired by recent work on the formation of literary canons and on the literary production of marginal social groups. It owes a particular debt to the work of Raymond Williams, who devoted much of his career to exploring the possibilities of discussing English literature and society together while respecting the uniqueness of specific texts. This is a debt not only to Williams's most general observation that "as a society changes, its literature changes" (1965, 268), and to his comments on the formation of a literary tradition, but also to his suggestive, though not wholly applicable, account of the interrelations between dominant and alternative or oppositional aspects at a given historical moment. Williams's distinction between two different kinds of alternatives on a status quo, which he terms the "residual" and the "emergent" (1977, 121-27), is helpful in discussions of the cultural manifestations of the middle class in nineteenth century Britain; it is not applicable in the present context of English Quebec fiction, which requires an assessment of a social group

linked not along class lines but rather along linguistic and cultural lines. Pertinent analogous notions that will prove more helpful here in an exploration of the situation of the little-known English writers of Quebec are those of “dominant” and “muted” groups. As developed by Ardener, these notions allowed for the exploration of “socio-intellectual structures which regularly assign contending viewpoints to a non-real status, making them ‘overlooked,’ ‘muted,’ ‘invisible:’ mere black holes in someone else’s universe” (25). Also relevant are the notions of dominant “mainstream” culture and “subculture,” and of “centre” and “periphery” as used by commentators on feminist writing (Russ), on paraliterary genres (G. Klein), and on the literary canon and the attribution of literary value (Guillory, Kolodny, Herrnstein Smith).

II

In considering the English fiction of Quebec in the 1980s as posing a muted and peripheral alternative to the dominant literary culture of English Canada—in considering why these texts have not attained “power in the world” (Kolodny 302, Tompkins)—some historical perspective is needed on the place of Quebec English fiction in the Canadian literary canon.

Any discussion of the English-Canadian literary tradition in the period at least since the 1940s will reveal the centrality of the older generations of writers who lived in Quebec. The fiction of English Canada came of age in the Quebec of the 1940s, when Gwethalyn Graham published her bestselling and controversial novel *Earth and High Heaven* (1944), and Hugh MacLennan published *Barometer Rising* (1941) and then the enormously influential *Two Solitudes* (1945). Consider, for example, the number of times English-speaking Quebecers won the Governor General’s awards for fiction (Graham in 1944, MacLennan in 1945, 1948 and 1959, Brian Moore in 1960, Richler in 1968). Consider too the eminence and indisputable importance during the 1940s, 50s and well into the 1960s of Hugh MacLennan as a kind of national cultural figurehead—an eminence that diminished substantially after his *Return of the Sphinx* was savaged by many Canadian critics in 1967. To these names of Quebec fiction writers of the 1940s and into the 1950s should be added those of A.M. Klein, Mavis Gallant, as well as Joyce Marshall, Constance Beresford-Howe, and the poets Irving

Layton and Ralph Gustafson, both of whom were publishing short fiction during this period.

Surely as striking as this galaxy of names from the Quebec of the 1940s and 50s, however, is the extent to which the English writers of Quebec subsequently dropped almost entirely out of sight on the English Canadian literary horizon. This is a process that began already during the late 1960s.

The momentum established during the 1940s and 50s lasted well into the 1960s with the emergence of Leonard Cohen as a novelist, with Hugh Hood's early collections of short stories and novels (his influential first collection, *Flying a Red Kite*, appeared in 1962), and with Scott Symons who then lived in Montreal and who published his iconoclastic *Place d'Armes* in 1967. Bharati Mukherjee and Elizabeth Spencer were also writing in Montreal; Constance Beresford-Howe stopped writing from the early 1950s to the early 1970s. These women had less of a public presence as fiction writers than the male writers, and their impact on Canadian literature has been much less noticeable. The lack of powerfully effective women's voices in English fiction from Quebec has been all the more marked in comparison with the prominence of feminine voices among both francophone and English Canadian writers outside Quebec, and in comparison with the relative prominence of male writers within English Quebec. Curiously, moreover, the best-known Quebec-born anglophone women writers (Beresford-Howe, Gallant, Marshall) have done most of their writing while living outside Quebec.³

In the years of the Quiet Revolution, the new English writers in Quebec were in substantial measure responsible—along with a few other writers such as Alice Munro—for introducing a modernist interest in language into English-Canadian fiction. This was a project of which the group of writers known as the Montreal Story Tellers—John Metcalf, Ray Smith, Clark Blaise, and Ray Fraser along with Hugh Hood—were particularly conscious (Smith 1972, Garebian 188). By the late 60s and early 70s, however, the signs of decline in influence were becoming evident. Of this new generation, only Leonard Cohen would match the esteem in which earlier writers had been held, and he was to write no further novels after *The Favourite Game* (1963) and *Beautiful Losers* (1966). The fact that a group of fiction writers banded together, as the Story Tellers did in the early 1970s, to give ill-paid readings at schools and colleges in

and near Montreal is probably an indication of the sense of isolation—and of the missionary enthusiasm—that many young writers feel early in their careers. But where similarly placed young writers elsewhere in Canada, especially in Toronto, were inspired—more productively in the long run—to set up their own presses during this period (Coach House, Anansi, newpress, etc.), in Montreal the fiction writers were not involved in publishing. Certainly some English-language publishing houses were established during this period, but these were specialists in poetry (such as Véhicule Press), in children's books (Tundra Books) and in literary translations and non-fiction (Harvest House). The fiction writers within Quebec had good reason at the time to feel assured that their work would be welcomed by the established mainstream presses in Toronto (e.g. McClelland & Stewart, Macmillan, and General) and perhaps in New York (Doubleday, E.P. Dutton), and they did not devote any of their energies to creating new literary houses that would publish fiction. The dearth of English-language publishers interested in fiction would in due course be keenly felt by a later generation of writers.

The long slide from favour, combined with the fact that several writers have left Quebec since the late 1960s (Symons, Beresford-Howe, Metcalf, Blaise, Mukherjee, Spencer), has resulted in the unusual fact that English fiction from Quebec is still associated almost entirely with two writers who emerged more than 35 years ago—MacLennan, who has remained here, and Richler, who returned after years abroad—and that not a single English writer who has emerged out of Quebec over the past two decades has yet succeeded in making any significant mark on the Canadian literary scene.

In the course of interviewing dozens of writers, critics, editors and publishers in 1987 and early 1988, I found an overwhelming number of otherwise well-read and well-informed Canadians and Quebecers, French and English, unable to name even one new fiction writer in the English language from Quebec. There happens to be a whole new generation of writers living in Quebec who are writing in English and managing to publish variously worthwhile and in a few cases remarkable fictions with Canadian, American and British publishers. Even good work—such as George Szanto's *Not Working* (1982) and Gail Scott's *Heroine* (1987)—has been

overlooked or allowed to disappear after a brief flurry of attention. Other novels that have been admired and then quickly forgotten are Trevor Ferguson's *Onyx John* and Sharon Sparling's *The Glass Mountain*. Contemporary English writers from Quebec have recently been generally underrated when not altogether excluded and unknown in anglophone as well as in francophone literary circles in Canada.

While one might have expected to find some curiosity about what has been written in English, especially since so much of the fiction is set in and comments on Quebec, it is nonetheless relatively easy to account for the lack of interest in anglophone writers among francophone Quebecers who see the English language as threatening to the survival of French. All the more interesting therefore to find the editors of *Liberté* devoting half the 1989 issue, which is subtitled "Strangers in paradise/Étranglés au Québec," to articles by sixteen anglophone writers on the language issue in Quebec: "Les Anglais ne sont-ils pas notre tache aveugle?," the editors ask in their preface. "Les avons-nous jamais vus, nos voisins immédiats? . . . Nous ne les connaissons guère, et nous nous complaisons dans notre ignorance."

What is harder to understand is the indifference of English-Canadian critics—and the fact that in spite of the shared language, this indifference seems to be rather more deep-seated than that of the francophones within Quebec. *Liberté* provides only one of several recent indications that some literary circles within Quebec are beginning to develop an interest in local English-language writers. Recent and forthcoming translations of novels by Gail Scott, Edward Phillips, Trevor Ferguson and David Homel are further evidence of this interest, as is the encouraging inclusion of "littérature québécoise anglaise" in *Lettres québécoises*, which, in its Spring 1989 issue, has published an article on the novels of Edward Phillips (Leith, 1989 "Westmount"), and announced its editorial decision regularly to feature commentary on recent English-language publications. There is no such sign of increased interest from English Canada.⁴

III

How, then, can the effective exclusion of the younger generation of English writers of Quebec from the English

Canadian literary canon over the past twenty years be explained?

One consideration, it might be argued, is that few writers outside of Ontario (and perhaps British Columbia) figure significantly in this tradition. To the extent that this is true, however (and it would need to be examined),⁵ this adds further support for the view that canonization is not dependent on literary criteria—and suggests that an analysis of the Canadian literary tradition should by no means restrict itself to discussing the English writers of Quebec.

Another possible explanation is that the decline in the perceived importance of English writers from Quebec is hardly surprising as it has gone hand in hand with the demographic, economic, and political decline in the importance of English Quebec. This is incontrovertible and is part of my argument, taking as it does the position that literary impact depends in some significant measure on extra-literary considerations. To it, indeed, I would add the fact that English fiction writers in Quebec have been at a particular disadvantage, relative especially to their anglophone colleagues in Ontario (and to varying extents in some other provinces) and to their francophone colleagues in Quebec, inasmuch as they have had few of the institutional supports (not only local English-language publishers of fiction, but magazines, literary awards, informed criticism, good press coverage, etc.) that writers need in order to thrive. Some of these circumstances have begun to change, and this will in due course have some effect.⁶

A further explanation, rarely articulated in so many words but underlying some of the treatment accorded English writing from Quebec, is that English writing from Quebec is just not very good. An unnamed critic cited in an article published in 1985 suggests that “if Montreal writers are ignored outside their own city perhaps it’s because their work is not any good” (Hancock 8). Accusations of insufficient literary merit may be appropriate in many cases with any individual writer; they are highly suspect, however, when leveled at a whole group of writers, especially when many of those writers have been respectably published and some of them have been extravagantly praised. It is not that long since Canadian literature generally was treated in similarly dismissive fashion. The same is true of science fiction, to take another example, and of writing by women. Such blanket

criticisms as that of the above anonymous commentator demand analysis of the criteria according to which a body of literary work is being judged. As Annette Kolodny says, "Instead of implying timeless or universal qualities, the question 'Is it any good?' now can be seen to imply the timebound and the interested" (303).

My own explanation for the neglect of the new English writers of Quebec is based on a line of argument used by such critics as Williams, Herrnstein Smith and Kolodny. These fiction writers, I would suggest, have been "selected out" by the English-Canadian literary establishment for reasons that have less to do with the aesthetic qualities of their work than with the process of significant change in perceptions of Canadian society that developed in the wake of the growth of Quebec nationalism during the 1960s.

It is a commonplace of Canadian political discourse that Canadians have historically been presented with two basic models of how relations between French- and English-speaking communities can be represented within our political institutions (Simeon). The one is a model in which French-English dualism exists from sea to sea. The other is the nationalist model of Quebec as a distinct society. Whatever the result will be of the ongoing constitutional discussions and their underlying social dynamics, in *literary* terms, the process of socio-political change that began in the 1960s has resulted in general agreement that there is a "linguistic frontier" between (English) Canada and (French) Quebec.⁷ Certainly the term "Quebec literature" is generally understood to refer only to writing in the French language. In this conception, the English writers of Quebec that were once central to the anglophone view of Canada are muted, made invisible, marginalized.

IV

This, however, is only part of the story. There are indeed literary criteria involved here too, even if they cannot be altogether abstracted from what Hazard Adams calls "power criteria." The social circumstances of anglophone Quebecers have clearly been different from those of any other social group in Canada. Gérard Klein argues that "the real subject of a literary work (or group of works) is the situation of the social group the author belongs to" (4). Given the connection between social circumstances and types of literary production, it should come as

no surprise to find a distinctive (and I might add eccentric) literary configuration in recent English fiction from Quebec.

This is, to begin with, the only group of English-language writers in Canada today whose work has a Quebec setting and includes francophone characters to any significant and credible extent. It is, accordingly, the only substantial body of contemporary Canadian fiction that shows an interest in relations between francophones and non-francophones.

Stylistically, the characteristic of English fiction in Quebec that distinguishes it most readily from much other English-Canadian fiction is its ready use of French language and syntax (and in several instances that of other languages, e.g. Spanish, Ukrainian, Yiddish; see, for example, the short stories collected in Leith 1989, *Telling*). Publisher Antonio D'Alfonso of Guernica Press describes some of this work as written in French, using English words, and he thinks this unusual use of language is partly responsible for the writers' poor reception in English Canada. A notable case in point here is that of novelist Maurice Gagnon, who has published over 20 novels in French, 3 in English, and who is ignored in both French and English literary worlds. Gagnon had his detective novels about the Montreal lawyer Deirdre O'Hara rejected by Toronto publishers on the grounds that his English is full of gallicisms, but when he sent the manuscripts to Collins in London, England, he received a contract forthwith.⁸

This cross-cultural effect, which gives some English Quebec writing a distinct voice, is most obviously in evidence in the work of some of the women fiction writers who have emerged during the 1980s and who have clearly been alert to the francophone feminist explorations of language-centered writing pioneered in Quebec by such writers as Nicole Brossard and France Théoret. Novelists Gail Scott and Ann Diamond are two particularly interesting women writers in this regard, both separately and—as Diamond's *Mona's Dance* (1988) itself refers to Scott's *Heroine* (1987)—in conjunction with each other. Both of these women have close ties with the francophone literary and artistic milieu in Montreal. Diamond's prose poem *A Nun's Diary* has been adapted for the stage, and was directed by Robert Lepage in a bilingual production which premiered in Montreal in November 1989. She too (like D'Alfonso) is struck by the extent to which Quebec writers use language differently from other

writers in the English language.⁹ Similarly, Gail Scott thinks that “anglophones writing in English in Quebec are writing in an English that’s including French” (Leith 1989, “Scott” 23). Co-founder of the French-language cultural magazine *Spirale*, Scott has been closely associated with the Québécoise feminist writers for many years, and her own earliest publications as a fiction writer were in French since she found it hard to gain acceptance in English Canada (Leith 1989, “Scott” 23). Her first book, a collection of short fiction entitled *Spare Parts* (1982), introduced into English-Canadian fiction some of the innovations pioneered in Quebec by the feminist writers. “Québécois women,” she says, “have found a place from which to write that’s somewhere between speech and writing . . . Language is a voice that has more texture than just the content of what it’s saying” (Leith 1989, “Scott” 24). Both *Heroine* and *Mona’s Dance* are characterized by a spiralling structure, the juxtaposition and superposition of different points of view, overlapping emblems and images, self-conscious use of language and syntax, and the rhythms of everyday speech.

Much of this English fiction of Quebec—whether feminist or not—perches precariously on the social and literary periphery. The centre having been lost, or proving to be elusive, the peripheral becomes central in this fiction. *Heroine*, for example, opens with a black anglophone tourist focussing on the city’s skyscrapers through a telescope on Mount Royal, and with the heroine herself, called Gail or G.S., lying in a bathtub in the Waikiki Tourist Rooms in 1980, pondering her personal and political development over the previous decade. The images of marginality are compounded with the introduction of a down and out “grey lady”—who is associated with Gail—while on a personal level, she replays the failure of her relationship with a lover. “Oh my love was that really us? With me at the centre and you watching from the margin of the picture? So what went wrong? I mean how did I slip out of focus in your retina?” (50).

A detailed discussion of the emblems of marginality in the body of English Quebec fiction of the 1980s is beyond the scope of this paper. It is possible, though, to suggest that an interest in marginality extends far beyond *Heroine* to include a remarkable number of otherwise dissimilar fictions: Keith Henderson’s political allegory, *The Restoration*, in which an anxious Anglo family surveys the Referendum period from suburban Roxboro;

David Homel's *Electrical Storms*, in which Vinnie Rabb and his family—"Bohunks in Bohunk heaven"—became suburbanites just as the suburbs began to fall apart" (21-22); Ferguson's *Onyx John*, in which the hero is "in exile" in Camden, Maine, where he feels "castaway," "for not only is Camden out of my country, it's generally out of sync with modern life" (13); Diamond's *Mona's Dance*, in which Mona, "whether expounding on the need for pornography in the kindergartens, or performing a striptease for an audience of close women friends . . . was always topical, always precariously balanced" (1988, 10); and Edward Phillips's four comedies of gay Westmount manners. Marginality, indeed, is the subject of this body of fiction.

The literary marginality of this body of work is most evident in its generic composition. To an extraordinary extent, English Quebec fiction of the 1980s is dominated by a concentration of what publishers describe as "genre fiction" — including science fiction, dystopian fiction, crime fiction, gay fiction, social satire, historical fiction and peculiar hybrids between such genres and mainstream realistic forms.

Hugh MacLennan's final novel, *Voices in Time* (1980), is a work of science fiction or of dystopian fiction set in the year 2030 A.D., some time after what are termed "the Destructions" of the late twentieth century, which killed all but a few hundred people along with most of the technology that modern living had come to depend on. John Wellfleet is an old man of 75 in 2030 looking back over his life in Montreal, where he was born in 1964, through the several Bureaucracies and the Great Fear as well as the Destructions. More recent examples of SF by Anglo-Quebec writers are Donald Kingsbury's *Courtship Rite* (1982) and *The Moon Goddess and the Son* (1986), Hélène Holden's dystopian *After the Fact* (1986), Robert Assels' *The Competition* and Michael Carin's *The Neutron Picasso* (1989).

At least as prominent as the SF novels are the works of crime fiction. George Szanto's *Not Working* (1982) is about a policeman from San Diego who becomes a househusband when his wife finds a job in Dobie, Wyoming, and whose interest in justice brings him up against sleazy local politics. Billed by the publishers as a mystery, this is really a social novel that incorporates some of the characteristics of crime fiction. In this, it bears some resemblance to Homel's *Electrical Storms* (1988), which again has many of the ingredients of a thriller and of

crime fiction: a violent death, suspense, the discovery of the body, a murderer, police, an investigation, etc., but without the mystery, and more important than the crime itself is the social context of white working class ethnic American kids during the sixties unprepared for the fact that the war in Vietnam was going to come and get them. Maurice Gagnon's novels are classic crime novels about a no-nonsense woman lawyer. Edward Phillips's first three novels, *Sunday's Child*, *Where There's a Will*, and *Buried on Sunday*, included some of the trappings of crime fiction, and *Buried on Sunday* even won Phillips an Arthur Ellis Award from the Crime Writers of Canada in 1987, but the criminal element is far less striking and interesting than the sensibility of the novels' various homosexual gentlemen.

Further examples of genre fiction include Martin Kevan's meticulous historical reconstruction of life in New France, *Racing Tides* (1984); Trevor Ferguson's epic adventure stories spiced with eroticism and mysticism in *Onyx John* (1985) and *The Kinkajou* (1989); Ray Smith's hybrid of historical fiction and fantasy, *Century* (1986); Donna Steinberg's light social satires, *I Lost it All in Montreal* (1983) and *Fat Chance* (1988); Keith Henderson's mix of political allegory and conventional realism in the unhappily titled *The Restoration: The Referendum Years* (1987); and Will Aitken's gay Bildungsroman, *Terre Haute* (1989). Hugh Hood's *The New Age* series of social-historical novels about twentieth century Canada is projected to include 12 volumes (the seventh and most recent volume published in *Tony's Book*, 1988). His sweep in this series is so monumental as to invite comparison with utopian and dystopian fiction—perhaps he is best thought of as writing “topian” fiction—rather than with mainstream individualistic narratives, and indeed his concluding volumes are planned as science fiction novels set in the future.

The point being made here is not that it is unusual for a literature to include writers working in such genres and hybrids of genres, but that it surely is unusual and possibly unique that there should be such a concentration of such work from so many of the most articulate literary voices of English-speaking Quebec. Significant as this is, it would not do to overstate the case. In addition to Scott and Diamond, there are a few other examples of experimental fiction (e.g. Allen, Harrison [1982], Von Westrenen, Webb) and some examples of more mainstream individualistic and realistic forms: most notably in Richler (1980), and also in

Sparling, Rigelhof, Harrison (1985), and in much of the short fiction of the period.¹⁰

V

Several of these fictions of the 1980s use a Quebec setting or deal with Quebec society in some recognizable way. Diverse as they certainly are in form and in accomplishment, they also articulate quite different stances vis-à-vis Quebec.

On the one hand is MacLennan's apocalyptic despair in *Voices in Time* over the growth of nationalism generally—and of Nazism and Quebec nationalism specifically—which, in its dire view of the future of Quebec, is akin to William Weintraub's dystopian satire *The Underdogs* (1979), a novel that looks forward to a future in which the Anglos are the "underdogs" in an independent Quebec.

On the other hand are the writers who have come to terms with the new Quebec. Such writers as Kevan, Szanto, Freed, Homel, Diamond, Gail Scott—in fact, most contemporary English-language writers in Quebec—dissociate themselves more or less firmly from conservative anglophone interests and institutions and view the future of Quebec less apocalyptically than MacLennan and Weintraub. Socially, the new generation of writers is very varied, including several working class writers, members of visible minority groups, first generation immigrants, and a substantial number of women writers. While still largely antinationalist (there are very few nationalists among anglophone writers), these writers are less anxious than many of the older writers are about Quebec nationalism; they are open to francophone aspirations, and interested in participating in Quebec society. In its distance from the English Quebec mainstream, its criticisms of the anglophone press, its links with francophone social milieux, and its political progressiveness, indeed, this new generation of writers furthers the long tradition of dissidence among English Quebec writers—a tradition that included F.R. Scott, A.M. Klein, Ted Allan and Irving Layton in their day, Gallant, Moore, Cohen, Blaise, and which included Hugh MacLennan too, once upon a time, and the William Weintraub of *Why Rock the Boat* (1961), if not of *The Underdogs*.

One measure of how conscious some contemporary writers are of their dissident role may be that Josh Freed's conception of the surprisingly successful *Anglo Guide to Survival in Quebec*

(1983) was precisely to create a lighthearted satiric antidote to *The Underdogs* and to the cloud of anglophone Quebec gloom and doom that had been generally prevalent in the late 1970s and early 1980s.¹¹ While ill-feelings have recently been generated by the language debate (see Ferguson 1989, "Maison"; Fischman, Chambers), it remains substantially true that, as Gail Scott puts it, "People who are doing significant things in the arts here in Quebec who are anglophones and who are going to continue to do those things have really accepted that being anglophone is being a minority in a milieu that's essentially francophone. And not being threatened—on the contrary maybe even being excited—by the things that have been happening here in Quebec in the last 15 years" (Leith 1989, "Scott" 24).

VI

Our final considerations in this preliminary exploration of the situation of English Quebec fiction in the 1980s involve the literary climate in English Canada; first, with regard to literary forms, and second with regard to literary subjects.

The English-Canadian literary critics' deep suspicion of genre fiction may be measured in a number of ways. One that is appropriate here is that even the warmest reviewers of *Voices in Time* preferred to ignore the fact that MacLennan was writing science fiction. (There was a similar reaction to Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*.) Even when the writer is as much of a canonical institution as Hugh MacLennan (or as Atwood), a dim view is taken of genre fiction; the writer who attempts to launch a literary career in English Canada on the strength of genre fiction is courting critical disdain. Given the alternative quality of so much of the English fiction that has emerged out of Quebec during this decade, it is therefore not altogether surprising that the new writers have had a cool reception and that their work has on the whole been treated dismissively. While some of the genre fiction is indeed formulaic and conventional enough to justify ready dismissal (e.g. Assels, Gagnon, Steinberg), this is not always or even mainly the case. Many serious and gifted Anglo writers have had great difficulty interesting Toronto publishers in their fiction, and they have accordingly looked to the genres most likely to appeal to the public and therefore the publishers. The result has, in many cases, been popular fiction of considerable sophistication

(Smith's *Century*, for example, and the novels of Szanto, Phillips, Aitken and Ferguson).

Added to English Canada's suspicion of genre fiction is the fact that Quebec is no longer the fashionable subject for English-language fiction it once was, and that since about 1980 (if not precisely since the May 1980 Referendum on Sovereignty-Association) English Canada outside Quebec has shown a less pressing need to understand Quebec than it showed during the 1960s and 1970s. In such a climate the understandable interest in Quebec taken by its English writers, and their qualifications as interpreters of Quebec to the English-speaking world, even their use of francophone characters and of the French language, may also have served them badly. In a story set in the Montreal of the 1940s, Mavis Gallant writes about Linnet Muir's search for a job: "My only commercial asset was that I knew French, but French was of no professional use to anyone in Canada then—not even to French Canadians; one might as well have been fluent in Pushtu" (1981, 243). In many ways times have changed almost out of all recognition since the 1940s, but English-language writers' knowledge of Quebec and of French is today of practically no professional use to them in contemporary English Canada.

As some of these circumstances change, there may in due course be a reevaluation of the hitherto neglected English writers of Quebec. Be this as it may, their work itself appears to be changing, edging, as it were, in from the wildly eccentric fringes. There is still genre fiction being written and published, but it no longer dominates the literary production of Anglo writers as it did earlier in the decade. While Edward Phillips is still writing about the foibles of Westmount society in his most recent novel, *Hope Springs Eternal* (1988), he can no longer be confused with a crime writer in a novel that for the first time includes no crime, and in which he has dared as only tentatively before to incorporate some of the quieter concerns of his aging characters' lives.

Much of this recent fiction remains formally conventional. This is true not only of some recent genre fiction (e.g. Carin) but of such other recent fictions as Katherine Vlassie's immigrant novel, *Letters to Byzantium* (1987), and Valmai Howe's autobiographical Bildungsroman, *The Dreams of Zoo Animals* (1988). The most interesting new writers, however, are using

language and narrative structure in innovative ways. Kenneth Radu's accomplished first novel, *Distant Relations* (1989), works with various overlapping layers of time in its vividly unsentimental account of the long and unconventional life of an old woman called Vera Dobriu. In an imaginative tour-de-force, Radu has made this marginal figure central to his fictive world by narrating the story in the first person from Vera's own point of view. As Vera's memories spiral around one another, and as the narrative voice acquires the intonation and texture of Vera's own speech, Radu's technique in this novel is reminiscent of Scott's *Heroine* and Diamond's *Mona's Dance*. Some of the same qualities are found in the best recent short fiction.¹² The marginal, which is the subject of English-language fiction written in Quebec during the 1980s, is in these fictions also the form. At this writing in 1989, it is too early to make any but the most tentative suggestion about the direction English Quebec fiction now appears to be taking; it is not, however, too early to suggest that the innovative work of such novelists as Radu, Diamond and Scott will bear watching as new English voices in Quebec fiction and new Quebec voices in English-Canadian fiction.

NOTES

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² Throughout this paper "English" will refer to the English language, and not to the ethnic origins of the writers. The question of what to call the Quebec writers who write in English is problematical, and there is no unanimity among the writers themselves as to the best term to use. They are of diverse ethnic origins (including Russian, Pakistani, Italian, American, Turkish, French, Romanian, German, Austrian, Ukrainian, Chilean, and various combinations thereof, as well as English), and the majority of them describe themselves as "English" writers and as "writers of English fiction." *Lettres québécoises* describes their work as "Littérature québécoise anglaise" (Printemps 1989). Most of the twelve writers I consulted on this question during May 1989 object more or less strenuously to being described as "anglophone writers." They have different reasons for objecting. Some feel it "compartmentalizes" them too much: "there's a presumption of ghettoization" (Rigelhof), "it's pigeonholing" (Sparling), and "'anglophone' makes you feel more and more marginalized" (Lawrence). Some find this too political a designation (Homel, Lawrence); and a few dislike the word "anglophone" (Phillips, Aitken, Radu, Ferguson): "it's an ugly word" (Homel). A few do think of themselves as "anglophones" (Kevan, Szanto), and one both recognizes that "anglophone" only means something in the provincial

context and relishes the fact that "anglophone" reeks with the peculiarity and particularity of being here" (Scott). All of them object to having their work described as "anglophone fiction," if only because the term "anglophone" seems properly applicable to the spoken rather than to the written language. A few further object both to "English" and to "anglophone," as "the writing tradition in Quebec is allophone, multi-ethnic and francophone" (Luxton). Luxton thinks the best term is "writers in the English language in Quebec." Diamond, who objects to "anglophone" because "it is so bureaucratic," and to "English" because she does not identify particularly with the English literary tradition, prefers the terms "Anglo writers" and "Anglo fiction" precisely "because," and here she happens to use the same words as Scott, "they suggest our peculiarity."

³ These issues are not raised by Coral Ann Howells, but they are issues to which her exploration of the links between women's writing and national identity in Canadian literature might provide an introduction.

⁴ The single exception to this is Geoff Hancock, editor of *Canadian Fiction Magazine*, who has not only published work by English Quebec writers (such as Ray Smith) over the past few years, but has also awarded the Okanagan Short Fiction Award to Montreal writers Renato Trujillo and Yeshim Ternar in 1988, and in late 1987 he invited me to guest-edit a special issue on new English writing from Quebec (*Canadian Fiction Magazine* 63 [August 1988]; reprinted as Leith, ed., *Telling Differences: New English Fiction from Quebec*).

⁵ See Ken Norris, "Whatever Happened to the Avant-Garde," *Essays on Canadian Writing* 36 (Spring 1988): 110-29, for a partial exploration of the establishment of a poetry tradition over the past twenty years.

⁶ Some positive recent developments include the establishment of the QSPELL Book Awards in 1988, the revamping of *Matrix* magazine in 1989, and the recognition won by several writers for recent books: Kenneth Radu's first collection of short fiction, *The Cost of Living*, was shortlisted for the 1988 Governor General's Award for fiction; David Homel's *Electrical Storms* for the W.H. Smith/Books in Canada First Novel Award; and Edward Phillips's *Hope Springs Eternal* for the Stephen Leacock Award for Humour. The first winner of the QSPELL Award for Fiction was Hugh Hood, for *The Motor Boys in Ottawa*.

⁷ This is the term used by Matt Cohen and Wayne Grady in *Intimate Strangers: New Fiction from Quebec*, xiii. Consistent with this view of a linguistic frontier, Cohen and Grady are typical of English Canadian (as, too, of francophone) editors and commentators on Quebec literature inasmuch as they do not acknowledge the existence of English Quebec writers in their introduction, nor do they include selections from such writers' work in their anthology. See Leith (1988) for some other examples of exclusion.

⁸ Taped interviews with Antonio D'Alfonso (15 June 1987), and with Maurice Gagnon (30 March 1988).

⁹ Taped interview with Ann Diamond (23 April 1987); a similar view is expressed by writer and editor Greta Hofmann Nemiroff (16 April 1987). No analysis of the language used in the English-language fiction of Quebec has yet been undertaken.

¹⁰ For anthologies of short fiction, see Douglas Daymond and Leslie Monkman, eds; Robert Sorfleet, ed; Terry Byrnes, ed; Steve Luxton, ed; Hugh Hood and Peter O'Brien, eds; P. Scott Lawrence, ed; Linda Leith, ed; and Michael Benazon, ed. Short fiction collections by single authors include those by Terry

Byrnes, Wanda Blynn Campbell, Jerry Wexler, Lesley Battler, P. Scott Lawrence, Kenneth Radu, Roma Gelblum Bross, Yeshim Ternar, and George Szanto (with Per Brask). The importance, for emerging writers, of local English-language publishing houses interested in fiction may be judged by considering how many of these titles, and how many of the experimental novels of the period, were published by the shortlived Quadrant Editions, which contributed significantly to the literary scene in the early 1980s. Véhicule Press has also published occasional fiction titles during the 1980s, including two anthologies and work by Shulamis Yelin and Gerry Wexler. The recent upsurge in literary activity is doubtless to be linked with the fact that several new local publishing companies, including Cormorant Books, Nu-Age Editions, The Muses' Company/La Compagnie des Muses, and DC Books have begun to publish English fiction.

¹¹ Taped interview with Josh Freed (8 June 1987).

¹² As in the best stories of Bereshko, Lawrence, Radu, Rigelhof, Szanto, and Ternar.

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