

READING DIFFERENCE: Views Of/From Québec

'The Novel of Quebec'
L'esprit créateur,
XXIII, No.3 (Fall 1983)

'The Language of
Difference: Writing in
QUEBEC(ois)'
Yale French Studies,
65 (1983)

'Sociologies de la
littérature'
Etudes françaises,
19, 3 (hiver 1984-5)

Barbara Godard

The study of Canadian and Quebec literatures is perennially accused of being parochial. While comparative studies of either of them in connection with other literatures have been few, most of the navel-gazing has been the consequence of a lack of international critical interest in them. Things have been changing of late on all sides of the relevant borders.

The title of a special issue of *Mosaic* edited by Robert Kroetsch in 1981 bore aloft the title 'Beyond Nationalism', echoing the standard raised in a 1977 issue of *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 'Minus Canadian' in the fight for literature *qual* literature that would leave behind a preoccupation with Canadian specificity. Notable in both cases was the introduction of structuralist and post-structuralist approaches to literature. And it is the impact of this newest of critical strategies that has also prompted the opening up of Quebec's literary frontiers. This happens from within in the issue of the Université de Montréal periodical, *Etudes françaises*, devoted to literary sociology, for here we find a number of contributions in translation from anglo-Canadians, even an article on the literary sociology of English-Canadian literature which, given the stated mandate of the periodical, constitutes a border violation of the first order. So too does the presence of Frederic Jameson represented by an article on mass culture which focuses on American culture. He appears also

in the *Yale French Studies* Quebec issues wearing a different hat, as French scholar, in a study of Aquin's revolution which he perceives as staged within the confined space of a room within a room. In this guise, Jameson exhibits the other opening of the borders which has occurred in recent years as a result of the very active promotion of Canadian and Quebec culture abroad by the Ministry of External Affairs and the Quebec delegations. The Association of Canadian Studies in the United States is a flourishing affair. Equally active is the North East Council of Quebec Studies whose members have contributed both to the *YFS* issue and to *L'Esprit créateur*.

Both issues are designed to introduce Quebec literature to American readers, though the fact that all the Yale articles are translated into English will make its impact broader. A quick glance at them reveals that this opening of borders has occurred under the banner of post-structuralism, contemporary critical discourse making it both possible to *see* Quebec for the first time and consequently making its literature subject to the appropriation of criticism. The maypole around which the narrative strands of all three reviews weave themselves is the question of ideology and literature. Most brightly coloured of the streamers are those of feminism and of deconstructionism—two modes of difference. Strangely, though, given this optic, there is an unfortunate lack of attention to the present occasion, that is to the ironic situation of publication within an American periodical.

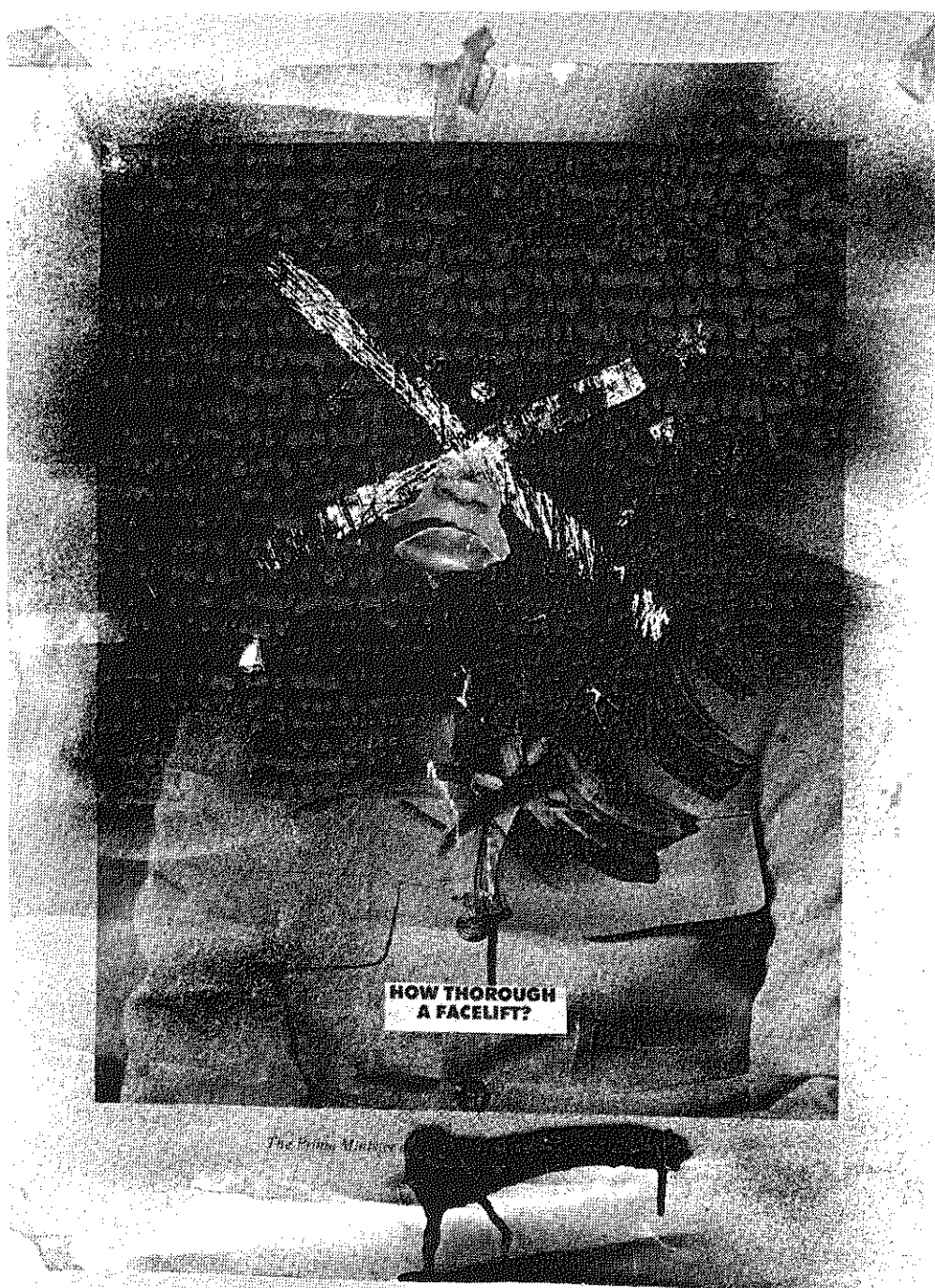
Indeed, the whole issue of American imperialism is left to the side in articles which address the difference that Quebec writing inscribes in itself with respect to that of France. Occasionally, there is some discussion, especially in the many essays on Hubert Aquin who emerges as the most important Quebec writer from these collections, of the power relationships with Anglo-Canadian culture. But of the United States, nothing. No essays on the American-ness of Quebec literature, on her lost son, Kerouac. These, however, as the teachers of Quebec literature in the United States will tell you, are the reasons that students flock to their courses, to reclaim their own Franco-American heritage. This atavism is deeply buried here, visible only in the geographical locations from which these Quebec issues have emerged, namely from the cajun stronghold of Louisiana, and from New Haven, Connecticut, home of the factories that made 'les Etats' into a 19th-century Eldorado for poor 'habitants'. At this juncture, I should like to reshuffle the paradox enunciated by two of the contributors to 'The Language of Difference', and turn it back on the irony of the present instance of enunciation. In her study of the language of Quebec writing, Lise Gauvin concludes:

Note that this literature began to be recognized abroad, precisely at a time when it ceased to define itself in terms of norm and distance. The recent reception of our literature, however, shows that exoticism is still expected of it. A whole study could be done on 'European readings of Québécois literature.' (p.48)

In turn, Joseph Melançon concludes his study of 'The Writing of Difference in Quebec':

With few exceptions, our literature has no status of its own since its mode of existence is French. Nor can our literature have a French status since France cannot see its Québécois distinctiveness. To write difference is to write this contradiction and to inscribe it in the form of writing used. The absurdity of it all is that this writing still reveals beneath the surface that it has been borrowed. Perhaps one day a literary work which accepts this absurdity and the consistency of derision will thus come into existence.

But what are we to make of the absurdity of this difference erased in translation into English? These questions are not addressed within the essays in the way Gauvin has pointed her finger at her European audience, listening to the first version of the essay. The study of the European reception of Quebec literature she advocates has been completed, and reveals the fact that the books published by Laffont and Seuil sell only a couple of hundred copies in France compared to the thousands sent over for the Canadian market. *Plus ça change, plus ça reste pareil...* Such a study now deserves to be made of the American reception of Quebec/Canadian literatures. Unfortunately, I shall not be able to fulfill such a mandate here. Several newspaper commentators (I'm thinking especially of Norman Snider in *The Globe and Mail*) have played the game of the Emperor's clothes and denounced the flimsy fabrication of the critical vestments in 'The Language of Difference', calling loudly in moral indignation against the Americans who have so distorted the literature of Quebec through their critical discourse as to make it unrecognizable. But his majesty's real nakedness has only been covered with yet another layer of insubstantiality. For the real truth of the matter is (at least in the version of the story I'm telling, and I could expand it with notes on the family or academic relationships of the authors) that most of the contributors to these issues are Canadians and Québécois, and not Americans at all. What we learn from these issues tells us more about the current critical scene in the Quebec/Windsor corridor than it does about American views of the north. Though it does perhaps indirectly tell us something about the United States. Despite the banner of deconstructionism being sent out from Yale, launched with the title of *différance*, there are no ideological lances left in its army once it has crossed the Atlantic. The pointed shafts are outside its borders, directed in, albeit very obliquely in the present case. The imperialist power, ideology being the preserve of anti-imperialists. For, as analyses of the



J. Samuels



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discourse of power inform us, authority is maintained through singularity of perspective, while all that it excludes on its way to the unique point of view has the possibility of multiple perspectives, since this encompasses both the view of power and the excluded view.

What I have just defined is Bakhtin's concept of the monologic and the dialogic. And Bakhtin is the *éminence grise* hovering behind these three collections, explicitly brought into play in André Belleau's contributions, 'Carnivalisation et roman québécois: mise au point sur l'usage d'un concept de Bakhtine', in *Études françaises* and 'Code social et code littéraire dans le roman québécois' in *L'Esprit créateur*, and in *Yale French Studies* by Maroussia Hajdukowski-Ahmed's 'The Unique, Its Double, and the Multiple: The Carnivalesque Hero in the Québécois Novel'. For what Bakhtin has done through his concepts of the ideologue and the carnivalesque is to introduce a vocabulary to handle the 'question of the interaction of the text, the author and the society', an epistemological problem that Lucie Brind'Amour, guest editor of *L'Esprit créateur*, raises as the contribution of Quebec literature in that special issue. However, Bakhtin's identification of specific literary devices for encoding ideological positions also replies to many of the criticisms raised by Marcel Fournier in his introduction to *Études françaises*, 'Littérature et sociologie au Québec', regarding the methods of literary sociology practised by earlier sociologists like Lucien Goldman. The deep structures sought by the latter that would link literary tradition and society need to be transposed into the relevant codes: his system founders on the question of homology, of identity intuitively perceived. A typology of codes is necessary to extend Bakhtin's work to Quebec fiction, something Belleau does in

his article where he explores the conflicts of codes through close textual analysis which leads him to study the dissociation of the knowledge to speak, the duty to speak, the power to speak and the desire to speak in Quebec fiction.

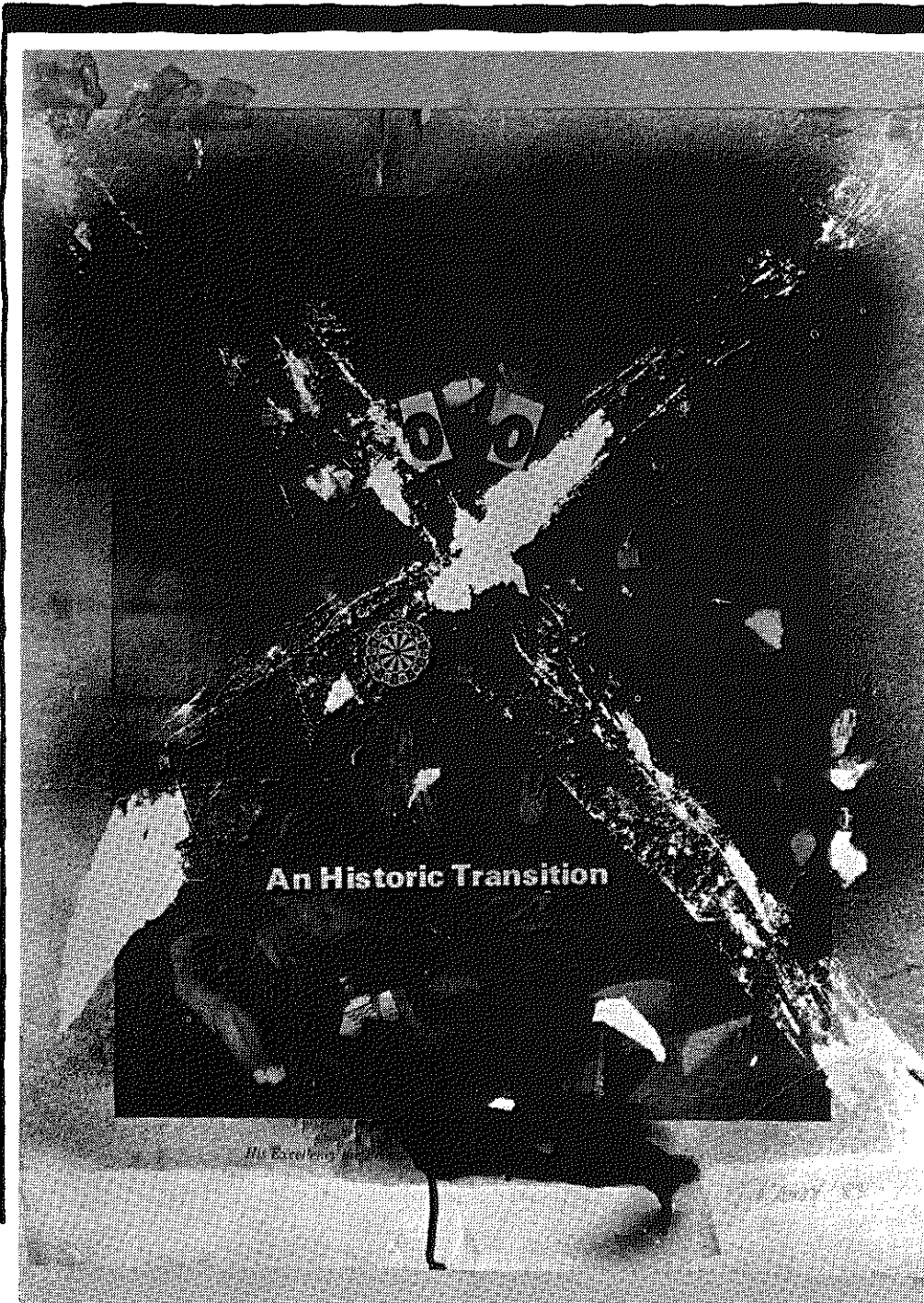
But as well as developing Bakhtin's theories, Belleau, like many of the other contributors to these issues, draws heavily on work in semiotics. As Ralph Sarkonak comments in his editor's preface to 'The Language of Difference', despite his own orientation of the problem evident in the title and the contributions of Melançon and Gauvin, already discussed, traces of Derrida and Foucault are less frequently inscribed in the texts than are those of Bakhtin and Barthes. And here the hegemony of Yale give way to that of Queen's and Toronto. The former hosted an international conference on Bakhtin in the fall of 1983 and will organize another in 1985. Toronto, in turn, is home of the Toronto Semiotic Circle and the International Summer School in Semiotics. Representatives of both are included in these issues: Pierre Gobin on the intertextuality of Michel Tremblay's drama and prose, Renée Leduc-Park on repetition in Ducharme, Gerard Bessette on his own writing—all in *YFS*—and Agnes Whitfield on the changing role of the narratee in post-1960 fiction in *L'Esprit créateur*; all hailing from Queen's: The Toronto group is represented by Janet Paterson on Anne Hébert's discourse of the unreal, Paul Perron on language and writing in Bessette's fiction, and Hadjukowski-Ahmed on the carnival. Bessette is a key figure here. As Sarkonak explains it, a semester Bessette spent at Yale in 1982 would seem to be the originating moment of the special Quebec issue. Its trace is to be found in the contribution of Jadwiga Seliwniuk, 'Gerard Bessette and His Dream of "Generation"' an essay for his course and one of the two American contributions to the issue. There is of course a great irony here for Bessette to become a major Quebec novelist when, as an intellectual, he has long lived in exile from Quebec in order better to foster a critical attitude to its discourse. Is this also Sarkonak's aim as a Canadian exile in the US, to establish his perspective through an emphasis on norm and distance?

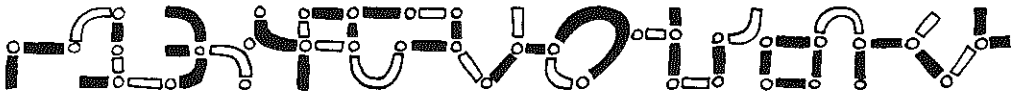
Concentrating on close readings of the texts in question and identifying the literary codes, none of these contributions heads for the regular and tackles the issue of transcoding, an essential element in the establishment of equivalencies between social and literary texts. Hope of such an undertaking is raised in *Études françaises* by Luc Racine's title, 'Symbolisme et analogie: l'enfant comme figure des origines', which in invoking figuration, especially symbol and analogy, promises to shed some light on the problematic relationship of author, text and society. This is later dashed by Racine's statement of intent to the effect that within his semiotic approach, he will be descriptive. A much more probing study of these issues

is that of Manon Brunet who, in 'Pour une esthétique de la production de la réception', in *Études françaises*, introduces reader-response theory to respond to fundamental epistemological problems in existing definitions of what reality is. Formalists and structuralists have understood the literary work as a concrete totality in its symbolic totality. To reconcile the two, to bring together diachronic and synchronic approaches, to conceive of the work dialectically, is her aim. Rejecting the efforts of both Goldmann with his structural homology and Tynianov with his theory of literary evolution, Brunet finds a model in Hans Robert Jauss' reader-response theory. In this, the literary work is made concrete in the moment of the actualization of a dialogue in the interpretation of signification. By adding to Jauss' analysis one of literary practices, she hopes to arrive at a history of the production of reception. To do this, one must explore the virtual signification of the work, that is 'the horizon of literary expectation', and also the effect produced by the work, 'the horizon of social expectation', that is the history of the different questions posed by readers at different historical moments and especially by those superreaders or agents of legitimation of symbolic goods found in the literary institution. Through comparative analysis of the meaning offered by different groups of readers she hopes to escape the possible intuitive or subjective implications of this hermeneutic. This is a relatively complex and flexible approach which takes account of the way individual read-

ers are positioned by social formations and, by shifting the grounds of the relationship between the social and the aesthetic to the activity of the historically-based reader, avoids many of the pitfalls of other sociologies of literature. Brunet's is the most forward-looking of the contributions on literary sociology, attempting to adapt the newest mode of literary theory to yet other uses, while most of the contributions are historical evaluations.

In trying to make a seamless whole of three different collections of essays, I have been doing some complicated feather-stitching to put this crazy quilt together. The order I have been constructing has its basis in the nearly simultaneous publication of these three periodicals and of their different implied readers. *L'Esprit créateur* includes texts from a wide geographical range, including French critics of Quebec literature, and more contributions by American writers than the other two periodicals. Consequently, there are more studies of specific works, fewer general studies, these latter presuming both a more knowledgeable audience but more specifically, a more widely-read critic. The introductory nature of this collection is implied by the first essay on 'Nationalité et nationalisme', in Quebec literature by Gilles Dorion which gives the venerable, though very necessary, periodization of Quebec literatures into the national novel, the nationalist novel, identity crisis, quiet revolution, autonomy reconquered. This is material for an introductory lecture on Quebec literature for undergraduates, not





intended for experts. The same is true of Madeleine Durocq-Poirier's 'Les romancières québécoises et la condition féminine contemporaine', which gives a brief historical approach within an outmoded images-of-women analysis, identifying a persisting image of alienated woman and a new group of feminist novelists. Happily this study is balanced by Karen Gould's analysis of Madeleine Gagnon which gives substance to this feminist writing. Here it surfaces in the archaic language of the maternal body, dream-like syntax and visceral imagery. While not as extensive as an earlier essay by Gould on contemporary Quebec feminist writing that appeared in *Signs*, 'Unearthing the Female Text', would do well in the collection 'The Language of Difference', where it answers the assertions made by Gauvin and Melançon that it is in contemporary feminist writing that difference has best been inscribed, not backed, however, by any concrete evidence within that volume. The close textual analyses of individual works in *L'Esprit créateur*—one on Hébert, three on Aquin, one on Ducharme—beg the question of the relationship of the aesthetic and the social by focussing on the former with generally satisfying results. However, Maurice Cagnon's supposed 'lecture idéologique' of Yves Beauchemin's *Le Matou* is disappointing—merely a plot analysis of the novel, lacking in critical sophistication on the question addressed. The unevenness in the contributions, as well as the use of both English and French in this volume, betray an ambiguous implied reader.

The issue of *Etudes françaises* on 'Sociologies de la littérature', is diversified in the range of its contributors and comparative in its format, as befits its analysis of the pluralist situation of sociological perspectives on literature. As a summary of the 'state of the art', it aims at a general—and mainly literary—audience. It includes specific textual studies like those of Jameson and Racine, as well as one on the city of Montreal in the novel of the seventies, 'La stratégie du désordre' by Jean-François Chassay, which treats the interest in fragmentation and the city as a new phenomenon of that decade, ignoring the earlier phases of accommodation to the city sketched out in work by Antoine Sirois and Barbara Thompson published in the sixties. The issue also includes a section of position pieces attempting to reconcile the traditional hostility of formalist and sociological perspectives on literature by outlining new inter-relationships between them. Among these are Belleau's development of Bakhtin's concept of carnivalization, Brunet's extension of reader-response theory and Greg Marc Neilson's 'Esquisse d'une sociologie critique' in which a model of 'homologie multidimensionnelle' is developed to account for interdiscursivity in the interaction of cultural praxis with the literary institution. By introducing the definition of the social discourse as everything that is said, 'the narratable and the argumentable in a given society', Neilson aims to move beyond Lukacs and Goldman's fetishism of the classics of a culture.

These new perspectives are placed in context by three introductory

essays, Raymond A. Morrow's historical overview of the critical theory of the Frankfurt school and John D. Jackson's review article on the sociology of literature in English Canada and Marcel Fournier's comparable overview of activity in Quebec. These latter two should be translated into English and published again as a diptych, for the perspectives they offer on their relative milieux are almost diametrically opposed. Jackson comments on the lack of interest by Anglo-Canadian sociologists in the sociology of culture and can cite only a collection edited by Paul Cappon, a series of articles by the Graysons—all shaped by the mirror metaphor, so strongly contested by formalist approaches—and his own work with the Concordia group on popular culture as a cultural practice contesting the social structure. Literary scholars following in the wake of Frye and Mandel have taken up categories such as the garrison mentality, the frontier, etc., drawn from the socio-historical context, and accepted as real facts. The question of why this particular option, why this debate, is never asked. And as literary critics have been crying out for a decade, such descriptive criticism is reductive of the complexity of both literary and social structures.

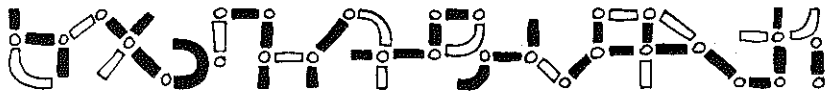
Against this depressing picture of activity in English Canada is the extremely rich history of literary sociology in Quebec in the last 20 years. Fournier's article refers back to the 1964 conference at Laval published by Jean-Charles Falardeau and Fernand Dumont which, despite attacks on the simplicity and rigidity of its empirical approach, provided a wealth of documentation on the material factors of literary production in Quebec and stimulated interest in the discipline. It had an impact on literary critics as evidenced in de Grandpré's *L'Histoire de la littérature française du Québec*, which avoided the extremes of a structuralist reading of the work or a reductive sociological one by placing the work of art and the artist in context. Fournier lists many examples of such analyses before the 1974 publication of 'Sémiologie et idéologie' in the review *Sociologie et sociétés* announced another shift in direction, the development of greater sophistication in both theory and methodology, direction that has marked critical essays in literary periodicals such as *Voix et images* and continued in the theoretical speculation manifested in the current special issue, marking a 20th anniversary. Fournier himself qualifies Belleau's optimism about the relationships of semiology and sociology, changing his term complementarity to complicity. In his conclusion, Fournier sketches in the grounds for evaluating the divergence of interest and sophistication in literary sociology in the two Canadas when he underlines the material conditions of Quebec literary production, heavily subsidized by the government, whether this be in the form of direct grants to artists or in the form of government authorized purchase of their works which

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have been placed on college curricula. The Quebec author knows that the act of writing in French is, as Hubert Aquin said, a political engagement. His alternative is silence and exile. But then, all Canadian writers are subsidized by the government. Why is this engagement not universally recognized as a political act? Echoing from the past are the traditionally different definitions of nationhood and statehood given by francophone and anglophone Canadians. For the former, the nation-state is perceived as the flowering of a specific culture. Anglo-Canadians, on the other hand, have viewed culture as an activity of the spirit divorced from the state which is conceived in terms of economic and political union of divergent cultures. Obviously, a much longer history could be written on this subject. But these two articles offer an excellent starting point for anyone interested in such speculation.

'The Language of Difference: Writing in QUEBEC(ois)', is, as I have suggested, an inner monologue by francophone Canadians which, written down, may be overheard by a wider audience. This dialogue with the self is ultimately what makes an interesting anthology, for the articles present something that has not hitherto been available to anglophones, critical articles which reveal what Quebec literary scholars think of their own literature. Much of what is published in English on Quebec literature is intended for the neophyte. Not this collection, which can be read equally profitably by the expert or the greenhorn in the field. It does attempt a range of coverage, by including essays by Laurent Mailhot on the essay, by Michel Van Schendel on 'Refus Global, or the Formula and History', by Valerie Raoul on the diary. While the focus is on contemporary fiction, Lise Gauvin's essay ranges back to Octave Crémazie and Guy Lafleche writes





about Ringuet's classic novel, *Trente arpents*. The theatre is represented in Pierre Gobin's discussion of Tremblay which explores the difference in his work between fiction and drama, while Pierre Nepveu looks at those between poetry and fiction in 'A (Hi)story that Refuses the Telling: Poetry and the Novel in Contemporary Quebecois Literature'. Then there is the historical survey Ralph Sarkonak offers as introduction. All together, the essays make this publication one with wide appeal.

But the impact it will have can be measured also in terms of the success with which it bridges internal and external approaches to the novels, synchronic formalist analyses with diachronic and/or social critiques. And the whole anthology does so effectively. Taken alone, Janet Patterson's study of Anne Hébert's 'discourse of the unreal' is an excellent close analysis from a semiotic perspective of Hébert's range of techniques for problematizing the 'real'. In the context provided by the opening three essays, this becomes not just a particular stylistic trait but one of the mutations of writing involving successive saturations which is a manifestation of contradictory forces brought into play in literary production itself. Like Melançon the reader of Hébert follows the trace of these contradictions in which 'difference is written as an expressive device of the semantic *différend*.' Hébert's textual subversion may also be read as an early attempt at the deconstruction of other cultural models—the full assumption of derision and absurdity—that is currently the work of Quebec feminist writing. Given the emphasis here, in Sarkonak's introduction, and Gauvin's general statements on language and difference, about the role of Quebec women writers in assuming the contradictions of writing against everyone else and for the splendours of the Mother Tongue, it is surprising not to find more analysis of women writers in this collection. We can read Mary Jean Green's 'Structures of Liberation: Female Experience and Autobiographical Form in Québec', but this is a study of the 'classic' women writers, Roy, Guèvremont, Claire Martin and Marie-Claire Blais. Like Paterson's essay, this one is suggestive, but stops too soon to illustrate Melançon's contention, ending as it does with prophesy by quoting the words of Nicole Brossard about these writers: 'How is it that women have played such an important part in our literature. (...)With what collective schizophrenia did their own phantasms connect? On what oppression did they throw light?' To follow this up with a study of Brossard herself, of her practice of *dérive* and *différence*, would be a logical development. But the ultimate flaw in the argument constructed by the anthology is that it fails to take this step. The lucky possessor of *L'Esprit créateur* can turn to

Gould's essay on Gagnon's female text, though its celebration of an archaic language is not the same thing as Brossard's careful deconstruction of literary and social norms and her assumptions of the nonsense of paradox, writing always acting out the adventure of language itself, the game of reading-writing-reading. In Brossard's work, a feminist critique of patriarchal ideology is married to a deconstructionist analysis of discursive formations and a Barthesian heritage of semiotics. The interested reader of French can pursue this question in the studies of Brossard and *La Nouvelle barre du jour* in *Féminité, Subversion, Ecriture*, edited by Suzanne Lamy and Irène Pagès. But the one who reads only English will be left with her hunger, though many of Brossard's creative works are available in translation.

So, while many intersections of approaches that emphasize the symbolic function of a work and those that emphasize its social functions have been mapped in these three collections, more work is needed to fill in the outlines. What can be perceived from them, however, is that the *Tel Quel* project of uniting Marx and Saussure, marxism and structuralism, is far from forgotten. It is alive and well and living in Quebec, a repetition with a *différence* that makes all the sense.

1. Jacqueline Gerols. *Le roman québécois en France*. Cahiers du Québec, collection Littérature (Montréal: Hurtubise, HMH, 1984).

Barbara Godard teaches English and French Literature at York University and is in the graduate program of Social and Political Thought.

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