HOW TO IMAGINE: A Narrative on Art and Agriculture

by Gianfranco Baruchello & Henry Martin

(New Paltz, NY, McPherson & Company, 1983;
Toronto, Bantam Books, 1985)

"We forget — as Bacon did not forget — that there is a natural history of souls, nay even of man himself, which can be learned only from the symbolism inherent in the world around him."

—Loren Eisely[1]

THEY say that all the atoms and particles which make up our planet were processed and reprocessed inside the hearts of stars, before explosions called supernovae sent them spinning off across the universe. It seems as though an atom in you could come from one star and one in me from another. One function of mythology is to render to us an image of the universe, and science is doing this for us now. It is also going a long way towards serving another function, which is to awaken a sense of awe, humility and respect in the face of that *mysterium tremendens* of which we are part.[2] On a clear night, with the naked eye, we can see about 10,000 stars, which is approximately the number of grains of sand we can hold in one hand. But it seems that there are more stars in the universe than there are grains of sand on all the beaches in the world. Scientists tell us that we are receiving light from galaxies which are, or were, so far away that it left them before our galaxy, the Milky Way, was formed. Now, perhaps, they are black and dead, particles zooming off from them to some other destination. On and on they go, these examples, this information, building up a context for us. It's humbling, but at the same time liberating. Actually, you don't need too much of this from science to awaken that second function of mythology, only a stout walking stick and time to poke around and think about it. It's funny how you can sense the general in the particular.

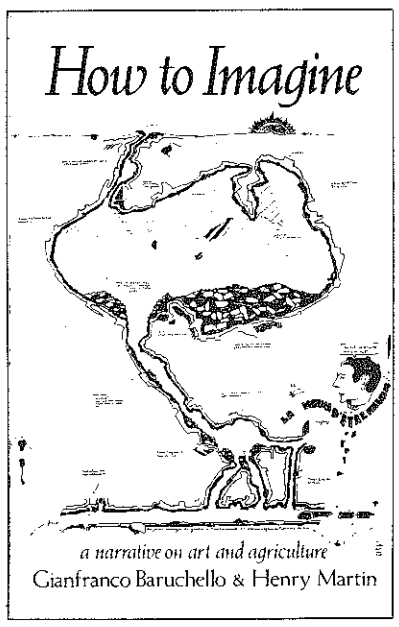
I remember a year or two ago a show at the Art Gallery of Ontario called "The Mystic North" of paintings, mostly Canadian and Scandinavian, which were about the great silence up yonder. Something about it disturbed me, not just that most of the paintings didn't seem very mystical, or that they missed the mystical quality we feel to be up there, it was the implication in the show that that was where the mysticism was, not down here in southern Ontario or anywhere else and that, incidentally, we owned a chunk of it as a natural resource; maybe it's something to do now with the Canada Council, and its Scandinavian counterpart.

In the artificial chopping-up of time we could say that 1973 was the end of the sixties the way 1914 was the end of the 19th century. In the United States, for example, there was this feeling when Nixon beat McGovern at the polls. A lot of people across the western world, for various and complex reasons, went into themselves, some of them, in all manner of ways, took up residence in the country. *How to Imagine* is a book about an eight-year experience on a small farm in the countryside outside Rome. Gianfranco Baruchello moved there from Rome in 1973 with his companion and wrote this book in 1980, in collaboration with his friend Henry Martin, from a month of daily conversations. The book is subtitled "A Narrative on Art and Agriculture" and the publishing category on the back cover reads art criticism/philosophy/agriculture. Well, there's a tryptich! Do I see Kenneth Clarke cavorting in a greenhouse? No, but there are tensions in this threesome which make for interesting reading. Baruchello is a natural raconteur, his narrative has a looping, elliptical quality and we are taken from the topsoil down to the depths with a grace which keeps even heavy-duty ideas friable and fertile. One moment we are sitting on the back of a tractor, the next plunging beneath the fields on the stern of Dante's barque; we are tying string along the rows of peas only to be groping out of the labyrinth with Theseus, along Ariadne's thread.

Baruchello is an artist who has been showing in Europe and America since 1961. He was politically active in Rome from 1968-73 when he started the farm he called "Agricola Cornelia" which, roughly translated, means "Cornelia Farming Enterprises". "It was," he says, "all on really a very small scale, a few fruit trees, a little salad, like I said, it's not at all that we decided to come here to live because I wanted to investigate the idea of a descent into the bowels of the earth. We just sort of came here to live."

The eight years were a business of putting one foot in front of the other, feeling the way one step at a time, meditating on the objects which appeared, and the consequences and implications of these objects. There was no particular programme to be followed. To begin with the farm was a carry-over from Baruchello's political activities. It was through politics that he first made a formulation of an idea of a trans-aesthetic dimension to art, it was, he says, in terms of politics and political consciousness that he'd first begun to conceive of art as an exemplary and moral discourse. Early on he began to agriculturally squat the unused plots of land around his original house and garden, but as time went by he was cajolled by the owners into buying them, as money permitted. So, what started out as a political gesture ended up as a nice farm on the outskirts of Rome with cartloads of sugar beets and potatoes trundling out of the gateway. How could one call this art? How did it even move outside the category of real life? After all, a potato is a potato and travels easily, everywhere, to fulfill the needs it must. There was this danger of turning into a bourgeois gentleman farmer, whereby Agricola Cornelia would become just part of his biography, a base for his work, as opposed to the work itself.

But, that's precisely what seems to have happened. The issue of what is farm and what is art is left open in the book, and it seems to a large extent that the farm did provide a basis, objects for his work as an artist. Well, what was the work? — paintings, drawings, films, photographs, notebooks and more, but apart from a drawing called "Cross Section with Underground Systems" on the front cover of *How to Imagine* I don't have the work before me, only this book, which is part of the work. Well, these were the work in one sense, but Baruchello is at pains to point out that these were a by-product, the real work lay with the objects themselves, the sugar beet, the hay, the fields, the earth and what was beneath the earth. Let's be clear about it, there is nothing wrong with operating a farm and producing produce, it's just that Baruchello's interests lay in a subtly different direction; perhaps it would be better to say at another level. The essential point is, how does he stand with regard to the farm, what is his relationship to nature? Well, not a voyeuristic one, or aesthetic; the farm was not a happening or a staging ground for events, but an involvement in the very deepest way with itself as object to him as subject. He asks, "'What's a cave?' or 'What's the life of a man in a cave? What's the nature of our relationship with the ground, with the earth, with dirt? What was the meaning of the discovery of agriculture? What's a forest, a jungle? What's grass? and Why do animals feed themselves on grass?'" We read of cows and sheep and their desperate hunger, how cows will eat all day in the field, return to the stall at night and push and fight to get at the hay and eat and eat as though they hadn't had a bite for days, and this great tide of grass passes through them, through their four stomachs, almost as though the grass was using the cows for its own purposes, not the other way around. Out of the pages emerge images of these objects as part of a larger scheme of things, part of the universe, the cow standing like a "great big wheel-less machine" intent and serious upon the production of its dung, on the death and rebirth of the grass. "You don't just stand there and have polished thoughts about the nitrogen cycle, you end up by asking yourself about the meaning of things, you end up wondering about the relationship you have to these mechanisms of animal slavery."



WHAT started out as a political gesture ended up as a nice farm on the outskirts of Rome with cartloads of sugar beets and potatoes trundling out of the gateway. How could one call this art?

The issue is one's attitude to nature, both as an individual and as a society. This is no small issue, it's been the meat and potatoes of religion and religious persecution since time out of mind. Just up the road from Agricola Cornelia, in Florence, in 1600 Giordano Bruno was burned to death for declaring that God was both immanent and transcendent. It's really a question of ways of being in the world. On the one hand, immanence implies that the Creator is in the creation, the creation is part of the Creator, there is an in-dwelling presence of God in the world. On the other hand the Creator is outside of creation, transcendent to it. This is the mainstream Judeo-Christian belief. The first attitude produces a reverence for nature, the second gives one license to use nature as a natural resource, it gives us dominion over it. Grief and confusion result. Women are inevitably included with nature, real sexuality falls into disrepute, huge one-sided beasts move into positions of power. Things become, in a word, unnatural.

So we have here what could be a description of the ways subjects relate to objects. It would be interesting to see a history of art from this standpoint, to compare Picasso's and Braque's connection to their objects with that of Pop Art, for example. "It's easier and more profitable to think about a seed than to contemplate or reason about a plastic bottle for dishwashing detergent." Baruchello is concerned throughout the book with the meaning of art, the possibilities of "testing the power of art against the power of the much more potent social structures that stand adjacent to it."

Instead of doing specialized activities of the category called art he is intent on doing normal activities but dwelling on their possible meaning until a process of transformation occurs. And over this eight-year period a transformation does take place. The political rationale fell away and he moved from being a "street fighting man" to, what? — to something else. Most importantly he encountered the feminine, the earth, the mother; in Jungian terms the anima. There is something radical in this, something courageous. It is important, I would say the most important thing we can do as a species. So there is this sense of going down into the earth, making contact with something larger, here, now, in the place where you are. In all of this there is a sense of weight and relevance, things which need to be revisited. For Baruchello it is an answer to this masculine domination over nature and a response to the exploration of space, which he sees as "a refusal of the earth as an experience of the unconscious." "The idea then that we'd do better to return to the earth as an almost polemical reply to the exploration of space is the idea that I really started with in this adventure called Agricola Cornelia."

So you don't go flying off into space with the attitude that it's O.K. to smear this stuff on the planet then flush it down the universe to start again somewhere else. You look carefully at your resources and at the waste you're producing and you say well, maybe it's better to turn our attention to this planet and learn how to live with it. That's our task. But there is still this spirit we have, which, for example, drove those men in their little wooden ships from northwest Europe across the globe. That's part of history, but now, I wonder, can we afford to foster it in the same way with almost five billion people and more to come? I mean it's still there in us, so what do we do with it? Well, one answer may be with Baruchello's experience. To all appearances his farm was just a farm, with a given size, but by working on it he produced other dimensions. It is in the production of these other dimensions that the art lies. By working on the objects they are transcended, they become vehicles of a meaning which gives our spirit a place to grow.

This is a wonderful book. There are things I would like to have mentioned but I simply ran out of space. Van Gogh, Thoreau and Duchamp are three names; Duchamp is at the heart of the book as he is in the heart of the author. Here is a quote of his from the book: "I like the word 'believe'. Generally when people say 'I know,' they don't know at all, they believe... I believe that art is the only form of activity through which a person can manifest themself as a real individual. It's the only way they can go beyond the stage of animal, since art looks out onto regions that are controlled by neither time nor space. To live is to believe...or at least that's what I believe."

Notes

1. *The Night Country*, Loren Eisely, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1984; referring to Francis Bacon, 1561-1626.
2. c.f. *Creative Mythology*, Joseph Campbell, Penguin Books, 1976.

Simon Harwood
is a Toronto artist.

REVIEWS

MOVEMENTS AND MESSAGES: Media and Radical Politics in Quebec

by Marc Raboy
translated from French by David Homel
(Toronto, Between the Lines, 1984)

THE immediately appealing quality of Marc Raboy's study of radical media in Quebec is that at least half of its length is devoted to an examination of the 1970s. Writing on social movements of the last 25 years too often slides into a perspective from which that decade represents nothing more than the playing out of tensions and contradictions rooted in the Epic Sixties, like the fade-out of a particularly raucous record. *Movements and Messages* is at its most useful and novel in discussing magazines, newspapers and cooperatives after 1970, with an attentiveness to the particularities of specific conditions rather than a reliance on shopworn "life cycle" theories of radical movements.

Any examination of Quebec politics from the sixties onward must account for the relationships between oppositional movements there and those widespread throughout the industrialized and developing world during the same period. Specifically, this involves disentangling the long-term itinerary of a nationalist politics in Quebec from the more global but less enduring impact of generational conflict. How one unties these knots will have a significant effect on how one accounts for the relative decline of radical politics in Quebec over the last decade.

Jacques Parizeau, the Parti Québécois' ex-Minister of Finance, has spoken frequently and glowingly in recent years of the *garde montante*, the ascendant generation of Quebec business school graduates, moving to occupy command posts within the Quebec economy. To see in this development a political event of any significance is to find a continuity in post-war Quebec politics: the nationalist impulse, for Parizeau, has passed through the political and professional classes and is now fuelling an entrepreneurial revolution. At one level, this account is simply symptomatic of the tenuous link between a nationalist politics and a project of radical social transformation. More importantly, however, it is a reading of recent Quebec history based in a narrative on cumulative and autonomous social development, rather than one of shifts across the ideological spectrum.

At odds with Parizeau's history-telling, then, is one which sees the new entrepreneurship as a local variant of the ideological retrenchment now widespread in western/northern countries. This perspective is more likely to emphasize the ground shared by Quebec radicalism of the 1960s/1970s with counter-cultural and New Left movements elsewhere. Viewed from this vantage point, the decline of prosperity on a world scale and the political revolution of the baby-boomers acquire considerable explanatory weight as factors in the political shifts of the late 1970s in Quebec.

Raboy acknowledges, in passing, sociologist Serge Proulx's analysis of "political generations" in Quebec, the link between groups defined by age and class and those political entities which serve, for a time, as the embodiment of their aspirations (the provincial Liberals in the early sixties, the PQ, later). What the near future in Quebec will decide is not so much the accuracy of this notion — Bourassa's Liberals may well crystalize the younger generation's apsirations, however incoherently — but the inevitability of progressive development implicit in the model. Raboy's book was published just prior to two noteworthy events in Quebec's political life — the crisis in the PQ, and the formation of a new coalition of opposi-

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tional energies, the *Mouvement socialiste* — but it anticipates the first and would, one hopes, be read by those involved in the second.

Given Raboy's limited objectives, his political analysis of Quebec from 1960 to the present offers little more than an outline. Conflicts between class-based and nationalist politics, for example, are dealt with primarily as sources of tension within particular media projects, rather than as elements of the underlying political culture. Most readers are likely to be sufficiently familiar with the overall context to make these connections themselves, but one would welcome an analysis which posed the relationship of each media project to larger questions of political conjuncture and strategy in greater detail.

The merit of the book is that it looks, in an ordered and informed fashion, at most of the significant oppositional media practices of the last 25 years: the intellectual revues so important in the 1960s, the press cooperatives of the 1970s, the FLQ's use of radio, and so on. Of particular interest and detail is Raboy's account of the role of the media in transforming the Montreal Citizen's Movement, perhaps the most useful section of the book. While the strategic dilemmas and problems of coalition faced by the MCM were shared by similar urban reform movements in the 1970s, the extent to which the dominant media shaped the MCM's internal development still provides a revealing example of these processes at work. Montrealers familiar with ex-MCMer Nick Auf der Maur's ongoing self-justificatory use of his *Gazette* column to drag Nouveaux Philosophes and end-of-ideology rhetoric into municipal politics will find this useful background. The book might have benefitted had Raboy focused exclusively on this period, reduced discussion of the 1960s to a preface, and analyzed other movements of the 1970s in greater detail.

The book's only weaknesses are those of omission, and as a regrettably brief account of an eventful period it will probably prove of even greater use to non- or English Quebeckers in its translation than to its original francophone audience. Raboy himself may be said to exemplify two tendencies whose importance in shaping Montreal's rich political culture should not be overlooked. As a "freelance writer, journalist, broadcaster, and university lecturer" (the back cover) his work typifies the sorts of intersections between academic, journalistic and political activity which are so common in Quebec and crucial to its politics. Secondly, as a radical anglophone, he is in a tradition of those whose political positions and activities provide a useful reminder to other Quebec anglophones that theirs is not a univocal politics.

(One day the story will be told of the *Sunday Express*, an anglophone weekly published by a conglomerate which, in the year or so preceding its demise in late 1984, was probably the largest radical newspaper in Quebec — only because its owners, depending on a sports section and lottery results to appeal to its public, gave a couple of politically-committed reporters an apparently free hand.)

My own, more limited contact with oppositional or alternative media in Quebec made me regret Raboy's skimming over the decline of Leninist politics in the late 1970s, and his acknowledged omission of discussions of specifically counter-cultural activity. When I moved to Montreal, in 1978, far-left groups like En Lutte or the Communist League were the loudest and most visible, to an extent that their rapid disappearance was all the more remarkable. What emerged in subsequent years was the role of a feminist critique in the dissolution of these groups, as stories of sexual harassment, Stalinist guru-ism and gender-based divisions of labour finally broke ground. Raboy's book is not intended as a history of radical politics in this period, but a feminist analysis of the practices which he studied, or which overlapped these, is called for.

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