

GERARD BESSETTE

A Tribute

Mary Jane Edwards

GERARD BESSETTE (b. Ste-Anne-de-Sabrevois, Québec, 25 February 1920), the editor of three anthologies and the author of one volume of poetry, eight novels, one collection of short stories, and several works of criticism, is a seminal figure in contemporary Québec literature. Yet, since 1946, when he left Montréal to teach French at the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon, he has lived almost continually outside his native province — in New York City (1949-51); in Pittsburgh (1951-58); and since 1958, except for one year he spent teaching at Laval, in Kingston, Ontario. Despite, however, his receipt of two Governor-General Awards, for *L'Incubation* and *Le Cycle*, his Fellowship in the Royal Society of Canada (1966), the publication of an English translation of three of his novels, and his presence among us, his is hardly a household name in English Canada. To reveal aspects of the life and works of Gérard Bessette is one reason for this interview.

There are other reasons, of course. I first met Gérard Bessette at Queen's in September 1960. I had just come to study for an MA, and he had just moved from RMC, where he had taught French for two years. In 1960-61, I was one of two students in a graduate course he gave on French-Canadian literature. I admired his teaching method and his critical ability then; I delight in his fiction now. This interview was thus also partly carried out to allow me to pay my personal tribute to Gérard Bessette.

I have culled this interview from two sessions we recorded in Kingston on 17 October 1980, and 21 November 1980. During the first, we concentrated on his criticism, although his fiction was never far from our conversation; during the second, we discussed his novels. I have included in the notes examples of, and bibliographical information about, Bessette's critical articles.

As it worked out, these sessions came at a very significant time in the life of Gérard Bessette. On the 7th and 8th of November 1980, the Department of French hosted the "*Colloque Bessette*" to honour the man who had retired from Queen's the previous July. On 26 November 1980, the Government of Québec awarded Gérard Bessette *Le Prix Athanase-David* for 1980, the highest award for literature that the province can bestow. *Canadian Literature*, of course, neither hosts colloquia nor bestows awards. I hope, however, that the publication of this interview will serve as its homage to a professor who pioneered the teaching of French-

Canadian literature, a critic who revolutionized our reading of it, and a novelist who has created some of its most exciting works.

EDWARDS: You started writing poetry and doing your criticism on poetry. *Poèmes temporels* (1954) was the first volume of creative writing you published. Your MA thesis and your doctoral dissertation both dealt with images in Emile Nelligan's poetry. Now why did you turn from writing poetry and talking about poetry to writing fiction and concentrating on fiction in your criticism?

BESSETTE: Who knows? I just lost interest in writing poetry. I suppose it had something to do with the fact that in my opinion, the only great writer we had when I was young was Nelligan. I admired him greatly, and it never crossed my mind that I should devote my time to foreign — that means French — literature, so I didn't have that much choice. I had not discovered Albert Laberge yet. No one knew about him. Gabrielle Roy published *Bonheur d'occasion* (1945) only when my MA thesis was almost finished. Anyway, at that time you could not write a thesis about contemporary writers. There was as well Ringue's *Trente arpents* (1938), and that was it. So, after I quit writing poetry at the age of twenty-five or so, I wrote a few, not many, critical articles. Then there was a long silence as far as creative writing was concerned. I started again when I was thirty-six or thirty-seven. I say again, because I remember in New York writing the beginning of a novel in 1950 or so.

EDWARDS: Why do you think it never crossed your mind to work in French literature?

BESSETTE: Mind you, my doctoral thesis deals with French poets as well as French-Canadian ones. But to me it was absurd that I should devote my time to writers who were foreign, first, and who had so many critics in France, second. I still don't understand the *Québécois* who devote most of their time to French literature.

EDWARDS: But you were a pioneer in the criticism of French-Canadian literature, especially in the way you approached it.

BESSETTE: Yes, there's no doubt about this. I was one of the first to get a doctoral degree in French-Canadian literature, maybe the first at the Université de Montréal, I'm not sure, but certainly among the pioneers.

EDWARDS: In one of your early articles on Nelligan, you talk about the importance of "*la critique formelle*" as opposed to "*la critique foncière*" and "*la critique historique*."²¹ Why did you think in the 1940's that formal criticism was so important?

BESSETTE: Because I did not think then, and I do not think still, that history of literature is literature. To me that is history. I did not want to specialize in

history. I wanted to study literature in its specificity, let's say, so I was quite bored with the courses we had in literature. The only course that I loved was a course in history given by Lionel Groulx.

EDWARDS: You studied under Lionel Groulx?

BESSETTE: Well, I attended as an auditor. I was not enrolled in history, but he was an outstanding professor.

EDWARDS: Do you think he influenced your view of French Canada at all, because he is very nationalistic and very Catholic?

BESSETTE: Oh, I was an unbeliever even then. It was not so much his *patriotisme* that influenced me. It was his eloquence; using only notes, he spoke slowly, clearly, and well. He was, I think, a great teacher because he could both analyse and synthesize. When he lectured on French-Canadian history, he linked events in Canada to events in France, Great Britain, and other places in Europe and beyond. It was an excellent course in history. Maybe I loved it more because I did not have to attend. But my courses in literature weren't worth much.

EDWARDS: But what stimulated your interest in formal criticism? Did you read other critics, or did you just invent your own method yourself according to the text, because you do say that if you're going to do formal criticism, the text in a sense imposes on you the kind of questions you're going to ask? Isn't that right?

BESSETTE: Yes. You know, I have the impression that I did it more or less by myself. Maybe it's not true, but that's the impression I have. Of course, I read Ferdinand Brunetière, Jules Lemaître, Emile Faguet, and Albert Thibaudet, and quite often they would speak of literature.

EDWARDS: And then you took another step. In the 1960's, you moved into "*la psychocritique*," a criticism based very much on Freudian ideas.² I notice that even in your criticism of Nelligan, for example, you went from talking about his images to talking about his Oedipus complex.³ What psychologists and critics were you reading in the 1960's?

BESSETTE: I read Freud, of course — actually, as I explain in *Mes Romans et moi* (1979), I reread him — and Charles Mauron, who is considered to be the founder of psychocriticism in France. I read Charles Baudouin, and I loved Marie Bonaparte's book on Edgar Allan Poe. Psychocriticism gives you a feeling of power, for you have the impression and/or illusion that you are discovering things that the writer himself did not know. That's a great satisfaction.

EDWARDS: You get there, though, by looking particularly at images and patterns.

BESSETTE: Oh yes, oh yes.

EDWARDS: Do you agree, then, that to analyse the techniques of a work isn't really enough?

BESSETTE: Yes, formal criticism seems to me now a little *désincarnée*, a little disembodied. It would not satisfy me anymore just to study the form of images as I did in my thesis. My aim now is to delve into the unconscious of the author. In 1960, I had not written anything about psychocriticism, so I was still a formalist.

EDWARDS: That's right. And I think that's the difference between *La Bagarre* (1958), *Le Libraire* (1960), and *La Commensale* (1975), which dates from then, and *L'Incubation* (1965). The first three are very formal novels. In *L'Incubation*, on the other hand, it is almost as if you've thrown all form out, and you've gone so far the other way that the novel becomes a little shadowy. There isn't enough of the realism that is in *Le Libraire*, for example, or even in *Le Cycle* (1971), which has this quality of solidity, of concreteness.

BESSETTE: Oh yes, well, Gilles Marcotte thinks that with *Le Cycle*, I took a step backwards because it's too realistic.

EDWARDS: Oh, I don't think so. Anyway, I've been rereading your criticism of other contemporary French-Canadian novelists. You've deplored the fact that Hubert Aquin and Jacques Ferron have become what you call "*des monstres sacrés*" in French-Canadian criticism,⁴ you've written long, important articles on each of Yves Thériault,⁵ André Langevin,⁶ and Victor-Lévy Beaulieu.⁷ It seems to me, however, that the novelist you've returned to most frequently is Gabrielle Roy. At various points you've talked about the importance of *Bonheur d'occasion*, and you've praised it highly.⁸ Do you have any general comments about fiction in contemporary Québec?

BESSETTE: Well, I have not followed it very closely these last ten years. I devoted maybe a fourth of *Le Semestre* (1979) to one novel, Gilbert La Rocque's *Serge d'entre les morts* (1976). Obviously, I think that La Rocque is important.

EDWARDS: What do you think of Victor-Lévy Beaulieu now?

BESSETTE: Well, his last half-dozen books have been, I think, extremely disappointing. When he returns to the family cycle, maybe he will again re-emerge, but I am not too optimistic.

EDWARDS: What about Langevin? You called *L'Élan d'Amérique* (1972) a disappointing, but basically a rather exciting new beginning for him because, when it appeared, he hadn't published a novel for a long time.

BESSETTE: I was hopeful. His last novel, *Une Chaîne dans le parc* (1974), had some success, but I didn't think it was very good. There was an error in point of view. It was third-person, and it should have been first. You know, I think if there is an optical mistake in a novel, it is enough to really ruin it. *Une Chaîne dans le*

parc is not alive, and about this matter I have not changed. To me the first quality of a novel is for the characters to be alive.

EDWARDS: You said that about Rose-Anna and Florentine in *Bonheur d'occasion*.⁹

BESSETTE: Yes, but many secondary characters in it are also very much alive.

EDWARDS: One article you wrote on Roy, "*La Route d'Altamont, clef de La Montagne secrète*," particularly excited me.¹⁰ In it your approach to Roy changed from formal criticism to a psychological analysis of her relation to her mother which I thought was brilliant.

BESSETTE: I was excited too when I discovered that. That's one of the strong emotions I have had in criticism. When I unearthed the key to Gabrielle Roy's anxiety and anguish, that was a real discovery.

EDWARDS: I think you're absolutely right because I can't read the ending of *La Route d'Altamont* (1966) without crying. I think any daughter especially who reads that and who has left her mother is very much moved. There is also her point that in the end the daughter becomes the mother, and it's almost at the precise moment that the mother starts to become the child that the daughter starts taking on the personality traits of her mother. So you don't just kill your mother; you incorporate her into you at a certain point in your life.

BESSETTE: That's very true, but I don't think I developed that. Well, maybe I touch on it in my study of *Alexandre Chenevert* (1954).¹¹

EDWARDS: In later comments about Gabrielle Roy, you imply that after *La Route d'Altamont*, after she'd worked out her relationship with her mother, perhaps she had little more to say.

BESSETTE: Well, when I read *Cet été qui chantait* (1972), I said to myself, "She's finished." Then she published *Ces Enfants de ma vie* (1977), and that's a good book. But it's not a novel. It's *autobiographie romancée*. I think in that direction, she will still be able to produce something valuable, but I would be flabbergasted if she published another good novel.

EDWARDS: Do you still think, then, that *Bonheur d'occasion* is Roy's great work?

BESSETTE: Yes. But *Alexandre Chenevert* is also a good novel. There are these, and there are her works of fictionalized memoirs, *Rue Deschambault* (1955), *La Route d'Altamont*, and *Ces Enfants de ma vie*. The last is not as good as the first two, but it is still quite good. So there are these two *versants* in her production. They're both important. *La Montagne secrète* is interesting only because it permits one to know more about Roy's unconscious. I don't think it is a good novel.

EDWARDS: In your criticism, you use the term *la cénesthésie*, and I gather from what you say that a novel without this sort of tactile quality really lacks the kind of realism which makes it a good novel.¹² What qualities would your ideal novel have?

BESSETTE: Well, *la cénesthésie* is very important. It is the consciousness you have of the inner functioning of your body. The first sensations we have are tactile, but we also have very early, from babyhood probably, *une conscience cénesthésique*. When, in *Bonheur d'occasion*, Rose-Anna gives birth, that scene is very *cénesthésique* because you suffer when she is in labour. She is *extrêmement incarnée* at that moment. So Gabrielle Roy is a good writer obviously. It is extremely important to give the reader the feeling that he is touching something.

EDWARDS: Is that what you mean by realism then?

BESSETTE: Yes, but it also includes the different layers of consciousness.

EDWARDS: But I mean in terms of a style which allows the reader to get these feelings of touching and to know where he is at every point. When I was reading *L'Incubation*, for example, I felt sometimes *dépaysée*. I didn't know where I was, and that's what I meant when I said earlier that there didn't seem to be quite enough of this concrete placing of the reader to get him into the scene.

BESSETTE: Do you know what would have given me great pleasure?

EDWARDS: What?

BESSETTE: Your telling me that when you read *L'Incubation*, you had the sensation you were inside a womb.

EDWARDS: I know that's what I was supposed to have. But I was going to ask you about the techniques of language, content, and *optique* you use in your fiction to get the kind of realism you're looking for, because at your best, you do balance internal and external reality brilliantly. I think you do this in *Le Cycle*; I'm always aware, for example, of the fact that the first three narrators are standing by a corpse as they think. I feel the little details of the scene that come into each character's thoughts. Jacot, the little boy, watches his aunt, watches his mother and her lover, and reacts emotionally to them and the situation. I'm aware of the candles, and at the same time I'm aware that Jacot has to go pee-pee.

BESSETTE: That's *cénesthésie*.

EDWARDS: Exactly. Now, are you conscious of using certain techniques, certain kinds of language, or even choosing certain kinds of content to get that quality in your fiction?

BESSETTE: Yes, of course. I use the present participle to avoid pronouns and

subjects, and I omit connecting words because they are not necessary for comprehension. On the other hand, I tend to put together two or three words that are not synonyms because real synonyms hardly exist. In *Les Anthropoïdes* (1977), there are very many words that are joined with hyphens. These are not usually *des mots composés*. I just add hyphens. I also like to create new words. We had the noun *film*. Then the adjective *filmique* was created. That's a word I should have liked to coin. The creation of new words that the reader will understand right away is both legitimate and praiseworthy.

EDWARDS: Let's talk about your novels. When your first novel *La Bagarre* (1958) was published as *The Brawl* in English in 1976, Ronald Sutherland commented that it was still your "most intriguing book" because it was "almost uncannily prophetic with regard to labour problems, religion, language, education, and sex."¹³ Are you pleased that in 1976, Sutherland should call your first novel your "most intriguing book"?

BESSETTE: I don't mind, but I don't believe it's true. Well, maybe from the standpoint of what I said about society and history, it had its importance, but as a work of art, I don't find it intriguing. Recently there was a long criticism of it by André Belleau in *Le Romancier fictif: essai sur la représentation de l'écrivain dans le roman québécois* (1980). He found the different kinds and levels of language and the character of Jules Lebeuf particularly interesting.

EDWARDS: In *Mes Romans et moi*, you say that Jules Lebeuf is the character closest to you. Now Jules is a student, he spends much time talking about intellectual subjects, and he wants to be a writer, yet he works as a sweeper, he lives with a waitress, and he enjoys what I would call, without trying to sound snobbish, fairly lower-class activities and friends. And in the end he opts for his job and his waitress. Why did you put yourself into the novel as Jules Lebeuf?

BESSETTE: But I am not just Lebeuf. All the characters in the novel are projections of the novelist, all of them. What I said in *Mes Romans et moi* was that when I wrote *La Bagarre*, I was still torn among not only levels of language — you can see that very well — but also levels of society. I was from a lower-class milieu, but because of my studies, I was out of it. There were then these two poles. There was also a third, I suppose, because when I wrote the novel, I was living in the United States; hence the American Weston. It is funny, you know, because others have been convinced that Sillery was mostly myself, even though I am not "gay," as you say now. It is dangerous to identify the author with one character only.

EDWARDS: According to the recent checklist of your work compiled by Carole Pilotte, there have been two editions and several reprintings of your second novel, *Le Libraire* (1960); it has been translated into English and Czech; and the CBC

has dramatized *Not for Every Eye* (1962), the English translation.¹⁴ Why do you think that Hervé Jodoin and his adventures in St-Joachin have been so popular?

BESSETTE: I really don't know. I think that in a way he is a forerunner of the revolt among the young. You know, at the beginning he has dropped everything, and has had trouble with the Catholic Church. Then he gets into the book business and again has trouble with the Church. And then he just throws everything away and mocks the old régime. I suppose that is why it caught with the youth, because from all I hear, young students still like it.

EDWARDS: I find Hervé a rather nasty, passive aggressive little man. I am not sure that I like him, but I admire his wit, his irony, and his ability to plot and to exact revenge. Somehow he seems the perfect symbol for the society he depicts. Did you intend him to be both the agent and the object of your satire?

BESSETTE: I don't think that I plan characters that way. I do think, however, that I have a tendency to laugh both at others and at myself. I will attack others, but usually I attack myself also. I don't know that it is out of fairness. I think that it is a matter of a certain inner *distanciation*. So it is there, and I don't have to plan.

EDWARDS: It is also the role of the satirist. I think, for example, that the marvellous thing about Gulliver in *Gulliver's Travels* is that he is the gull and the gulled, especially at the end when, living in the stable with the horses, he almost totally fails to see his relationship with human beings. Swift, on the other hand, sees this relationship.

BESSETTE: I must read Swift again. I had forgotten about the horses.

EDWARDS: Yes, I was thinking of Swift and his horses when I was reading *Les Anthropoïdes*.

BESSETTE: Yes, but you must also remember how my "horse fixation" was analysed at the colloquium.

EDWARDS: *Les Pédagogues* (1961), your third novel, has not been translated into English and does not appear to have been discussed very much even in Québec. It was hardly mentioned, for example, at the colloquium. One question I have about it concerns Jules Lebeuf. He appears in the novel as the president of a union who eventually persuades Sarto Pellerin, the French professor who is the chief character in *Les Pédagogues*, to join forces with the workers. Now why did you reincarnate Jules? Did you intend to write a series of realistic, urban, socially relevant novels set in Montreal?

BESSETTE: No, but at the time — at the time, mind you, it is no longer my opinion — I felt strongly that there should be some kind of solidarity between the intellectuals and the workers. That was long before the labour unions became too

strong. It is also interesting that at the end of *La Bagarre*, Jules was forced against his will to go into management. I suppose I wanted him to swing back to the side of the workers, and that's what happens in *Les Pédagogues*.

EDWARDS: Despite the apparent disaster of Sarto's loss of his job at the Normal School, I found the ending ambivalent, but essentially optimistic. Did you intend Sarto to be seen as quietly triumphant in the final lines?

BESSETTE: Well, I wanted to leave the future open at least. I did not consider that he had undergone a final defeat, but that he still had a chance to do what he wanted.

EDWARDS: After *Le Libraire*, *L'Incubation* (1965) is your most popular novel. It has been translated into English and Czech, and it marks two new departures for you. You still use Montreal, but your main setting is now for the first time Narcotown, a small Ontario city where there is a university. And you plunge into a stream-of-consciousness technique where time, place, and action are all dislocated, and where conventional patterns of writing are broken. We've already talked a bit about *L'Incubation*. In *Le Semestre*, however, you hint that you may have another story to tell about a love triangle from the period of your life during which you wrote *L'Incubation*, and that in *L'Incubation*, there were things that you couldn't, or wouldn't, tell. I am wondering if that partly explains some of the vagueness of that novel for me.

BESSETTE: Well, that's possible, but from what I understood, your criticism was that at times when you were reading the novel, you literally didn't know spatially where you were. But I suspect that your objection goes beyond *la spatialité*, and you are probably concerned with the characterization as well. If this is the case, then the existence of another triangle below the visible triangle may explain why the location was blurry for you.

EDWARDS: Yes, I did mean more than location. T. S. Eliot says about *Hamlet* that it is not entirely successful because it "is full of some stuff / Shakespeare / could not drag to light, contemplate, or manipulate into art."¹⁵ Now that I have read *Le Semestre*, I am suggesting that if you at that time couldn't respond clearly to a certain set of emotions, it is possible that everything in *L'Incubation* is also slightly askew.

BESSETTE: Yes, that's quite possible. Indeed.

EDWARDS: We have already talked about several aspects of your next novel *Le Cycle* (1971). In *Mes Romains et moi*, however, you say that the character closest to you in *Le Cycle* is probably Julien. Why do you see him as your *moi* character?

BESSETTE: Well, there is a revolt in him. There is a tendency to try to get out of his milieu through foreign influences, like the Dutch mistress and Marxism. —

Of course, I am not at all a Marxist, so when I say that he is closest to me, that has to be transposed also. But I have undergone non-*québécois* influences in my psyche. — And there is the great pain Julien feels when he remembers his father. One of my colleagues also pointed out that Julien was central because he is the fourth of seven narrators in the book. I had not thought about this, but it makes sense.

EDWARDS: Have you ever tested the theory that if you open a novel right in the middle, you get the central scene? The fourth of seven narrators is the same thing in another way. But you have another *tour de force* because four of the seven narrators are women. Now, some feminists might say that to try to go into the psyche of women is a dangerous undertaking for a man, especially when you start talking about the menstruation of the youngest daughter. That's very bold!

BESSETTE: I don't know that it's bold, but I think it was worth trying. As you know, male artists envy women because of their power to create life. So, it's only natural that I should feel the urge to put myself inside their skin.

EDWARDS: Let's talk about *La Commensale*. Although it was not published until 1975, it dates from the early sixties. When I read it, I noticed its similarities to both *Le Libraire* and the Oedipus, Freudian nightmare memory which you analyse in *Mes Romans et moi*, and which seems out of place in the novel.

BESSETTE: Well, you know, this passage was not planned at all. It just came to me suddenly. When I look at it now, I am tempted to say that *La Commensale* really didn't work as a novel because already something deeper was working in me. It came out in that passage, but I could not integrate it with the rest of the novel.

EDWARDS: I was especially interested in what you said in *Mes Romans et moi* about *Les Anthropoïdes* (1977), your novel about anthropoids. I thought it was brilliant. In the novel the first-person narrator, the adolescent Guito, works out his role as the *paroleur* of his *horde*. He plays this role partly because he is wounded and has a dead arm; it leaves him solitary and in exile from "*le fleuve géant*," Kébékouâ, but the role is necessary to record the history and legends of his horde, and in a sense, to create his horde, because until he has spoken, his horde has verbally neither history nor legend and therefore doesn't truly exist. Would you agree that the *paroleur* of the Kalahoumes is equivalent to the artist of men and that the image you present of both is ambiguous, but essentially affirmative, triumphant, and even divine.

BESSETTE: There's nothing divine about it. Speech came to the species man little by little. What is surprising — and we are not surprised enough about this — is that words should sometimes have the power to give us sensations and visions that are just as vivid as if we felt and saw the real things.

EDWARDS: You claim that you don't have a visual imagination, but when each of those anthropoids wants to speak, *il image quelquechose*. Now *imager* means to see.

BESSETTE: *C'est le phénomène de la compensation*. When you lack something, you try to overcome it and you go even further than the people who have it naturally. That's why I made myself a vocabulary of all the traits of the human face and body. I knew I had to describe this animal, and I wanted to make the reader see things that I did not.

EDWARDS: I think that one reason why the ending of *Les Anthropoïdes* seems so triumphant is the stately, balanced rhythms of the language of its conclusion. I think, in fact, the rhythms of your language are one of the great strengths of your style. Are you aware of the music of language?

BESSETTE: Oh yes. The music of language I feel naturally.

EDWARDS: In *Le Semestre* (1979), we have another portrait of the artist, this time as an older man. In this novel, you present again Narcotown, Princess University, and Omer Marin, an almost sixty-year-old university professor, critic, and novelist. In order to present him, you abandon the first-person narration for the first time in years, even though you are still involved in stream-of-consciousness technique and the unconscious. Why?

BESSETTE: Well, although the *optique* is third-person, you see only Marin from either the outside or the inside, so you don't go over this double boundary. But I think that the third-person point of view was a necessity of *distançiation*. I didn't know how it would come about, but I knew when I began *Le Semestre* that I wanted to make a big swing from pre-history to something that gave the impression of being recent, even contemporary. But I still needed some way to achieve distance.

EDWARDS: You've also given the novel a very complex structure by writing in an analysis of *Serge d'entre les morts*, by mentioning other works of Québec writers — albeit slightly disguised — and by almost giving a history of recent Québec fiction, including that of Gérard Bessette, and by naming your chief character after Homer, the sailor, and the mother. So you've gone from La Rocque's novel and Québec literature to Homeric legend and Freud. Is this structure more *distançiation*?

BESSETTE: I have to rely a little on what others say about *Le Semestre* because this is my most recent book and very close to my personality. I don't really think that I am able or ready to analyse it yet.

EDWARDS: You have in some ways written a *roman à clé*. If you know Queen's,

you recognize many of the people in *Le Semestre*, and, of course, if you know Québec literature, you recognize many authors and books. Isn't this dangerous?

BESSETTE: I don't see why it should be dangerous. No novel is ever purely invented; all novels are always partly drawn from reality. I say nothing scandalous about other people.

EDWARDS: OK, three final questions. In *Les Anthropoïdes* and in *Mes romans et moi*, you express regret that you do not/cannot live in Montréal, but hope nevertheless to have many Québec readers. Several of them came to Kingston recently to honour you. Do you think you may become one of your "monstres sacrés" in Québec?

BESSETTE: I suppose the possibility is there.

EDWARDS: I wondered if that was one reason why nobody at the colloquium discussed the humour in your fiction. Everyone was treating you very solemnly.

BESSETTE: My "humour" is never mentioned. I think, for instance, that if *La Commensale* has one quality, it has some very funny scenes. But the critics have never laughed. They never say my novels are funny.

EDWARDS: Well, I'll say it. I think that even *Le Semestre* is funny, although it's a wise humour and therefore one chuckles quietly. But would you like anglos and anglotes, as you call us, to read you too?

BESSETTE: Sure. I'd like the whole world to read my novels. They would all have to be translated and published, of course.

EDWARDS: You mention in *Mes Romans et moi* your phobia about repeating yourself, and you give this as one reason why you did not publish *La Commensale* right after *Le Libraire*, and why you are tiring of psychocriticism. I sense too in *Le Semestre* that you may be leaving what you call your "freudomanie." Where do you think you're going?

BESSETTE: You're assuming that Marin is me! . . . But anyway, I hope that I am moving away from Freud, but I don't know where I'm going next. I'm still struggling with two novels. The last thing I actually wrote and published was a short story, "La Garden-Party de Christophine" (1980), in the collection of the same name. This was meant to be a prologue to a larger work, but the main body of that prologue has not been progressing well, and the other novel I'm writing is not satisfactory yet either. I hope that there will be something new, but I don't know how or what.

NOTES

- ¹ "Analyse d'un poème de Nelligan," 1948; rpt. in *Une Littérature en ébullition* (Montreal: Editions du Jour, 1968), pp. 27-41.
- ² "La psychocritique," *Voix et images*, 1 (1975-76), 72-79.
- ³ "Nelligan et les remous de son subconscient," 1963; rpt. in *Une Littérature en ébullition*, pp. 43-62.
- ⁴ "L'Elan d'Amérique dans l'oeuvre d'André Langevin," 1972; rpt. in *Trois Romanciers québécois* (Montréal: Editions du Jour, 1973), pp. 131-77.
- ⁵ "Le Primitivisme dans les romans de Thériault," in *Une Littérature en ébullition*, pp. 111-216.
- ⁶ "L'Elan d'Amérique dans l'oeuvre d'André Langevin."
- ⁷ "Les Romans de Victor-Lévy Beaulieu," in *Trois Romanciers québécois*, pp. 9-128.
- ⁸ See, for example, "Bonheur d'occasion," 1952; rpt. in *Une Littérature on ébullition*, pp. 219-38.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ "La Route d'Altamont, clef de *La Montagne secrète*," 1967; rpt. in *Trois Romanciers québécois*, pp. 183-99.
- ¹¹ "Alexandre Chenevert de Gabrielle Roy," 1969; rpt. in *Trois Romanciers québécois*, pp. 201-37.
- ¹² "Correspondances entre les personnages et le milieu physique dans *Bonheur d'occasion*," in *Une littérature en ébullition*, pp. 257-77.
- ¹³ *The Brawl*, trans. Marc Lebel and Ronald Sutherland (Montreal: Harvest House, 1976).
- ¹⁴ Carole Pilotte, "Gérard Bessette: Bibliographie analytique et annotée (1939-1976)," Diss. Université de Montréal, 1978.
- ¹⁵ "Hamlet," in *Selected Prose* (Peregrine Books, 1963), p. 101.

TOUCHABLE

John Barton

the pain that knits
 into my form
 knits my form into an
 other

it does not let go
 and does not
 mean
 to