

NATIONALISM AND LITERATURE IN QUEBEC

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I DO NOT LIKE the word nationalism. And I suspect that no one likes it, really. I have friends in Quebec who are in favour of independence for Quebec, but at the same time contend that they are not nationalists. Or, if they agree to a certain amount of nationalism in their separatism, they say that they want to see Quebec become independent so that the nationalist question will, at last, be settled, dead, and then Quebec will be free to talk about and deal with more interesting, more crucial problems. An example of this dichotomy is to be found in Réjean Ducharme's latest novel, *Les Fantômes* (*The Ghostchildren*), where the main character, Vincent Falardeau, says that he is "against every kind of nationalist sentimentality, but at the same time for the strong common sense of independence for Quebecois." So, nationalism is a dirty word. And it is even dirtier when it is applied to literature. Every intellectual knows that the association of literature and nationalism, at least in its traditional form, has never produced a single good book, and that it is, for the writer, a sort of straitjacket, an insistence on esthetic conformity, a sacrifice of the creative self to the laws of the group. Every programme of literary nationalism, during the last two centuries, has been, of course, oriented towards preservation, rather than innovation. Let's see, for instance, what an important critic, Ferdinand Brunetière, had to say about the nationalization of French literature, at the end of the nineteenth century. A literature, he said, becomes national when it frees itself from foreign influences, and develops in itself those internal qualities which a stranger does not see, or feel. It must submit itself, to achieve this, to didactic and moral purposes, "in the highest and the widest sense of these two words." This is not a very exciting programme, and I must add that in France, in French literature, it didn't have any lasting success. But it is significant that it became, in French Canada, the dominant literary theory for at least half a century.

Why is this so? Is it because French Canadians didn't go to school long enough, because they were, as we said in English Canada, an ignorant, priest-ridden people? That is too simple an explanation. The same phenomenon has appeared in every new-born literature — in North or South America, or in Australia — which has to use the same language as an already great European literature, in

answer to a very practical problem: how to distinguish itself from the mother-country, to assert its own individuality. In a letter to his friend l'abbé Casgrain, in 1867, Octave Crémazie, the most intelligent and widely read man of letters of French Canada at the time, stated the problem very clearly:

The more I think about the fortunes of Canadian literature, the less I think that it will have any chance of leaving its imprint on history. What Canada is lacking, is a language of its own. If we spoke Iroquois or Huron, our literature would live. Unfortunately, we speak and write, rather badly, to tell the truth, the language of Bossuet and Racine. Whatever we may say and do, we will never be anything more, in literature, than a simple colony; and even if Canada became independent and had its own flag shining under the sun of nations, we would still be simple literary pioneers. Think about Belgium, which uses the same language as we do. Is there a Belgian literature? Unable to compete with France in the perfection of form, Canada might have won a place among Old World literatures, if one of its children, a writer, had been able to initiate Europe, before Fenimore Cooper did, to the grandiose scenery of our forests, to the legendary deeds of our trappers and voyageurs. Today, even if a writer as gifted as the author of *The Last of the Mohicans* appeared among us, his works would not produce any sensation in Europe, because his irretrievable fault would be to have arrived second, that is to say too late.

Octave Crémazie was a realist: not only did he write poems, he also sold books, he was a bookseller by trade. Besides that, he was a connoisseur of the literature of the day, and of its ideological foundations. He knew that since the end of the eighteenth century, the literatures of Europe had become national (French, English, German), which was not the case before, at the time of Voltaire for example. He knew that the Romantics — and he felt himself to be a Romantic — strove to recapture the very roots of their national cultures: Victor Hugo reviving the Middle Ages, the Age of Cathedrals, in *Notre-Dame de Paris*; the German romantics returning to the traditional tales of their folklore. Of course, there are two levels of reality here, which must be separated clearly, even if they both refer to some kind of nationalism: at the first level, people are preoccupied with the problem of creating a new literature, which has to be distinguishable from the existing ones, and at this level literature is linked with the politics and the economics of nationalism; at the second level, I hesitate to use the word nationalism, because one is not concerned with frontiers and things like that, or even with cultural frontiers, but with an active force which works within literature itself. As a bookseller, as a man who wanted to see the birth of a distinctive Canadian literature, recognized “under the sun of nations,” Octave Crémazie spoke about the former; as a writer, a poet, he referred to the latter.

Let's examine these two interpretations a little further: first, the implications of the bookseller's point of view. And by bookseller, here, I mean, not only the man who sells books, but the whole complex of the literary establishment: publisher,

critic, and even the poet or novelist, inasmuch as he feels himself to be a part of a common, a national literature. Every respectable, well-functioning nation needs a literature, just as it needs a banking system and a railway network. It is said that the first major work of French-Canadian literature, the *History of Canada* by François-Xavier Garneau, was written in answer to the famous judgment of Lord Durham defining the French Canadians as a people without a history and without a literature. I am not sure that the anecdote is true, but it serves as a good illustration of the motivation which lies at the root of all the new literatures that were created — some of them in name only — during the nineteenth century. When a need like that is felt, you cannot escape a certain amount of nationalism. In the great European literatures, during the same period, nothing really important was said about literary nationalism, because literary traditions were strongly established before the national concept evolved. To speak about a “national literature,” or the “nationalization of the literature,” is to admit that your literature hasn’t really begun to exist, or that it is a minor one — a chip off the block of the Great literature from which it has not yet gained its autonomy. A “national” literature is a project, much more than an object; and we might even say, going to the limit, that a literature of that kind could exist without poems or novels (but not without criticism), by the virtue of the emotions and hopes that are invested in it. In French Canada, of course, the concept of a “national literature” was propounded much earlier, and with greater passion and consistency, than in English Canada. Why was this? The most obvious reason is that, among the industries that a nation needs to be respectable, or to survive, or to keep itself occupied, none, or almost none, was within the grasp of French Canadians. Industrial and economic development was entirely due to English Canadians — with a little help from their fellow Americans, later on. I will not try to say who was responsible; it is a very complex question. The fact is that we were left out, or that we didn’t want to participate. Instead of industrialists, of entrepreneurs, of merchants, we had lawyers, notaries, politicians and priests: all kinds of people who had to rely on the powers of speech to do their job. We became experts in politics, in religion — and in literature. That is not to say that we produced better politics, better religion, or better literature than English Canada or other colonies, but that we put a stronger stress on speech, on the expression of ourselves, thereby establishing an essential link between our collective existence and the expression of that existence and the expression of that existence through speech — and primarily by the written speech of literature. We were — and still are, up to a point — nominalists: we believed that by naming things we possessed them. It is not an entirely false assumption. There is a good case to be made for nominalism. English Canadians are beginning to understand that; Margaret Atwood’s book, *Survival*, and the acclaim it received, are signs that they, too, are coming to see their literature as a collective mirror and as a means of securing a collective consciousness.

I WILL NOT TRY to give a detailed history of the Great Nationalist Debate about literature which occupied Quebec intellectual life from Octave Crémazie and his friend l'abbé Casgrain, to its latest manifestations in, let's say for example, Victor-Lévy Beaulieu's articles for the newspaper *Le Devoir*. The programme goes, roughly, like this. We need a national literature — a literature that would represent, foster and impose our national identity. What subjects should such a literature deal with? Does it have to portray our day-to-day life, as Louis Hémon did in *Maria Chapdelaine*, or is it free to deal with any of the subjects which are the common bread of the writers of a given period? Must it be open to the various influences of Western Literature — primarily, French? Or, should it try to attain originality by rejecting those influences? What kind of language will it use: international French (or Parisian French, as they say cutely in Toronto), “joual” or that new brand of French that some writers call “le Québécois”? There are a number of possible variations to be played on these themes, but the basic structure of the music remains the same throughout our history. And I insist, again, that you don't hear that music in French Canada alone. It has been played very loudly, at certain times, by the various bands of our Southern neighbours. And, as I said before, Margaret Atwood's harmonica and a few other instruments are being heard, these days, playing some of these tunes across our land. In many ways — and not only in the literary field — Quebec books and life reproduce the various aspects of the evolution of the modern world with a particular vividness, and this vividness is perhaps due to the fact that we, French Canadians, are entering the global village or the electronics age, as Marshall McLuhan would say, without having first to divest ourselves of a strong industrial tradition.

But there is a paradox in the association of nationalism and literature, which I alluded to briefly earlier. While it is quite easy to discover a lot of critical essays advocating a national literature, or pretending to discover national or nationalist aspects of an existing literature, it is much more difficult to find writers, novelists, poets, to whom the epithet “national” could be applied. From the middle of the nineteenth century to, say, 1950, during the period which was dominated by the pretensions of literary nationalism in our criticism, there is only one major work in French-Canadian literature which could be interpreted safely as an expression of the nationalist emotions and struggles of Quebec, and that is Monseigneur Savard's novel, *Menaud maître-draveur*. It is not a novel in the conventional sense; it is more like an epic, with its roughly drawn characters, bearing uncommon names, engaged in heroic actions and neatly divided between black and white, bad and good, treachery and patriotism. Epics as a genre — I mean epics like *The Odyssey*, *La Chanson de Roland* — are made precisely for the exaltation and confirmation of the existence of a certain collectivity. They prove the value of a specific lan-

guage as a bond between the members of the nation. More than that, epics are the birth certificates of nations. It is quite evident that the novel, the modern novel, does not play the same role. It is interested in the individual, in his struggle within and almost always against society, including the nation. Epics are collectivist; novels are liberal. The best novels of the period, those of Albert Laberge and Claude-Henri Grignon, have nothing to do with the nationalist sentiment which inspires Monseigneur Savard's book. Claude-Henri Grignon himself was a nationalist; but, because he wanted to be a novelist in the tradition of Balzac and Zola, he wrote the story of a very particular character, Séraphin Poudrier, the miser, who could in no way become the symbol of the national aspirations of French Canada. Poetry, on the other hand, could lend itself very well to the expression of the national sentiment, and it is easy to find, during the same period, dozens of patriotic poems — including some by the above mentioned Octave Crémazie — all bad of course, all heavy with that kind of leaden rhetoric which is the trademark of patriotism in literature. The first important poet of French Canada, and the only one of that period who is still widely read today, Emile Nelligan, didn't speak about anything national — except perhaps snow, but it snows too in Russia, Poland, Germany and even in France. His subjects, his images, were drawn from the stock of images and subjects which belonged to the French poets of his time. His friend Louis Dantin reproached him, at first, for his lack of interest in national subjects; but he had to admit, later on, that it would have been impossible for Nelligan, with the kind of poetic genius he had, to impose on himself any kind of national pretext. There is again a paradox here: Emile Nelligan has become a national symbol, or legend, in Quebec literature, and I would tend to think that it is precisely because he didn't write about national subjects. He built a house of words, of symbols, large enough, rich enough, to accommodate the dreams, individual or collective, of many generations of French Canadians.

NOW, WHAT DO WE SEE, at the beginning of the modern era of French Canadian literature — say, from 1935 or 1940 to the fifties? First, a complete black-out of the nationalist intent in the works of the major writers, novelists and poets, of that period — and they still count as the major writers of our literature. Ringuet's *30 arpents*, Gabrielle Roy's *Bonheur d'occasion*, Roger Lemelin's *Les Plouffe*, Germaine Guèvremont's *Le Survenant*, are novels in the full sense of the word, and that means, among other things, that they are completely devoid of any kind of preaching, unlike what we find in *Menaud maître-draveur*. It is possible to read them in the light of the nationalist struggle of French Canada, and they have quite often been read this way, but then you can

read anything that has been written anywhere this way, if you are determined enough. The intent of these novels — I do not bother with the intents of the novelists themselves — is to depict life in its complexity, without trying to impose on the reader any particular point of view. What you read in these novels is the *Human Comedy* in French-Canadian attire. In poetry, the movement away from nationalist inspiration is even clearer, inasmuch as poetry is not expected to depict ordinary life, as the realistic novel must do. Alain Grandbois, Saint-Denys-Garneau, Rina Lasnier, Anne Hébert deal with the most general subjects; they are read as poets of the human drama, not the French-Canadian drama; they are recognized as poets of universal interest, rather than as loudspeakers for some particular, regionalist or nationalist movement. And, again, these poets — like the novelists of their time — undoubtedly reveal something, and something essential, about French Canada's mentality or spiritual history, but they do that at a level which cannot be that of nationalism. There were nationalist crises during the same period — I have only to mention conscription, which a majority of Quebecois opposed fiercely — but they didn't find their way into the major works of prose or poetry. French Canada was entering the modern era, and the new problems it faced, social and literary problems, urbanization, industrialization, proletarianization, intellectual and spiritual renewal, could not be contained in a strictly national perspective.

Of course, this separation between social, spiritual and national problems didn't last very long. We see that clearly these days. Yet, I hesitate to use the word nationalism in defining the new directions which Quebec literature has taken from the beginning of the fifties to this day. In the introduction to his anthology, *The Poetry of French Canada in Translation*, John Glassco wrote a few years ago about the new Quebec poets: "Brilliant, eloquent, impassioned and exploiting all the resources of new and exciting techniques, they seem too often preoccupied by political and national ideas, by the incandescent ideal of a beleaguered Quebec — and it is a truism that politics and nationalism have somehow never managed to make really good poetry." I am ready to recognize some kind of truth in that statement. It is true that "le thème du pays" — the theme of homeland — has played an important role in Quebec poetry from the middle of the fifties to the middle of the sixties. But, then, as is almost always the case with nationalism and literature, it was more consistently and explicitly stated by critics, than by the poets themselves in their poems. Among the principal poets of that period, I can see only a few who may truly be called "poètes du pays", poets of the homeland: Gaston Miron, Paul Chamberland, Gatién Lapointe, Pierre Perrault, Yves Préfontaine. Others have touched upon the subject occasionally; and, more significantly, some of the most important poets of the period, like Paul-Marie Lapointe, Fernand Ouellette, Roland Giguère, Jacques Brault, were counted among the poetic liberation Army of Quebec, not because they wrote about "le pays," but

because the whole of the poetry of that period was read, willy-nilly, in the light of the national aspirations of French Canada. I confess to have contributed, personally, to that kind of conscription — with the attenuating circumstances that it is extremely difficult to write about a body of poetry without taking into account its immediate social context. Besides, a most important question must be asked: are we right in assuming that “le thème du pays” is equivalent with politics and nationalism, as John Glassco seems to suggest? At least, we will have to give a new meaning to the word nationalism, and to distinguish it from the meaning it had in Ferdinand Brunetière’s theory. Traditionally, nationalism or patriotism is founded upon a given reality, geographical and spiritual, to be seen and felt by all; it thinks about frontiers, defence, exclusions. It is firmly assertive. It doesn’t bother with differences between individuals. On the contrary, “la poésie du pays” — which might better be called “la recherche du pays” — is interrogative, hopeful, and thinks essentially about what is coming, the future. The homeland, in that perspective, is what is to be done, rather than what is simply to be defended; it is seen not in isolation, but as a part of the world where the most general forces of the world are asked to play their role. A good example of that attitude is found in Gaston Miron’s poem, “Héritage de la tristesse.” At the end of the poem, after having described the sad state of “le pays,” the poet asks the winds of the world, the “universal winds,” to regenerate the country and give it new movement. I will quote the poem in French first, and then a translation by Fred Cogswell:

les vents changez les sorts de place la nuit
 vents de rendez-vous, vents aux prunelles solaires
 vents telluriques, vents de l’âme, vents universels
 vents ameutez-nous, et de vos bras de fleuve ensemble
 enserrez son visage de peuple abîmé, redonnez-lui
 la chaleur
 et la profuse lumière des sillages d’hirondelles

Now, the translation:

winds that shuffle the lots of precedence by night
 winds of concourse, winds with solar eyes
 telluric winds, winds of the soul, universal winds
 come couple, o winds, and with your river arms
 embrace this face of a ruined people, give it the
 warmth
 and the abundant light that rings the wake of swallows

You see that in these verses Quebec’s cause is not isolated, it is universal in its appeal; it joins voices with countries as diverse as Aimé Césaire’s Martinique, Senghor’s Senegal, Pablo Neruda’s Chile and many others. If this is nationalist poetry, I would disagree completely with John Glassco’s assertion that “politics and nationalism have somehow never managed to make really good poetry.” But

I prefer to say that this is not nationalist poetry. In Miron's poem, as in many Quebec poems similarly oriented, pity and love for the homeland transcend the narrow limits of nationalism.

I have noted earlier that the novel does not lend itself to that kind of passionate expression of the homeland, because it is more preoccupied with the individual than with the group, or society, or nation. But Quebec's contemporary novel, on the whole, is not any more a novel in the classical sense, and we may hear in it, from time to time, echoes of Gaston Miron's voice: in Hubert Aquin's *Prochain épisode*, for example, in which there is a merger, as well as a clash, between the theme of homeland, borrowed from poetry, and the form of the novel; in Antonine Maillet's work, which is nearer to the folktale and the epic (her novels deal with Acadia, but the problem is the same as in Quebec); in a few of Victor-Lévy Beaulieu's books, which equally veer towards the epic — an epic of misery of doom, implying a renaissance from the depths it describes; and, finally, in all of the tales, novels, plays and various tidbits of writing by Jacques Ferron, who stands today as one of the most important, and certainly the most abundant prose writer in Quebec during the last quarter of the century. Jacques Ferron's work is sometimes limited by nationalism, by his almost exclusive interest in the hopes and drama of Quebec; and this limitation reveals itself in the fact that it seems difficult for a non-Quebecker to read his books — his *Tales of the Uncertain Country* has met with only mild success in English Canada, and the only one of his novels published in France has passed almost unnoticed. But, still, I am convinced that he is — almost — a great writer. And I propose to end this paper by taking an example from one of his best novels, *Le Saint-Elias*, an example which shows how the "winds of concurrence," as Miron said, can blow through traditional nationalism and open it to the reality of the vast world. "Le Saint-Elias" is the name of a vessel, a beautiful vessel, which was built in Batiscan, near Trois-Rivières, on the St. Lawrence. To his bishop, who asks why the villagers of Batiscan have built such a beautiful, such a big vessel as le Saint-Elias, the curate replies:

I will answer you that it was to break the nut of the Gulf. It was all right to keep ourselves secluded as long as we were not a people. But we have become a people: let the nut of the Gulf be broken! let the impediments of childhood disappear! We have built the Saint-Elias to go beyond Newfoundland, on the big ocean, towards Bermuda and the West Indies, and if necessary the old countries. . . . Who are we, people of Batiscan? We are the equals of the discoverers from Saint-Malo, able to discover Europe, and to set the Cross there.

This is a good trick: reversing the course of history, colonizing the colonizer. The Americans have had some success with it. But for us, Canadians, English or French, it is easier said than done. The striking fact about le Saint-Elias, the beautiful vessel, is that the only collectivity, the only people with whom its sailors will establish a real contact, is an African tribe, and they will come back

from their voyage with an idol to be put up in the cemetery of their country parish. Thus le Saint-Elias succeeds in linking Batiscan to the world, but the link is between villages, skipping the great capitals of culture; not a vertical link, but horizontal. I see there a symbol of a new state of affairs in the relations between cultures and literatures, whereby the smaller ones, like ours, will perhaps be able to escape the nationalist obsession without being engulfed, to the point of disappearance, in the main currents of international literature. Nationalism, as I said before, is bred by an inferiority complex; you are forced to be a nationalist when, to exist in your own eyes, you have to compare yourself, explicitly or implicitly, to some father image. I think that we live in a world, now, where regional differences, regional cultures, regional literatures, are beginning to see themselves as legitimate expressions of humanity, and not only as subproducts of two or three dominating powers.

FROM THERE TO HERE

Alexandre L. Amprimoz

Decoration of narrow streets:
cats and torn papers.

From the brittle night
the sun roots out
the espresso echo
of coffee cantatas.

These are rare dreams,
lonely ladies
hiding in the ruins.

But I walk along wider streets
carved in ice and snow
and my fountainless piazzas
leave me thirsty.