

NOUVEAU ROMAN CANADIEN

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“LIFE WRITES LOUSY PLOTS!” Humphrey Bogart once observed, indicating an awareness of the role of the artist and the imagination in transforming reality into art and ultimately into a new reality. The *nouveau roman* of the last two decades is a good paradigm of recent developments in the transmutation of reality by a literary form, the novel, and by its techniques. *Le couteau sur la table* by the French-Canadian poet, novelist and film-maker, Jacques Godbout, is a novel that demonstrates many of the techniques of the *nouveau roman* as it has been fostered by the French novelists: Nathalie Sarraute, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Michel Butor and Marguerite Duras. While Godbout’s Canadian novel is concerned with the national co-existence of French and English, its style indicates an awareness of a universal phenomenon, a fascination for technique, an interest in the process of creativity itself.¹

Anyone who has read *Le couteau sur la table* will notice its affinities with film and will realize that it cannot be read as a traditional novel, as a linear exercise in realism or naturalism.² Rather a *nouveau roman* must be understood as a studied dramatization of the creative process itself, the conscious activity of the novelist at work. The *nouveau roman* can thus be compared to other art forms such as music, theatre and especially the film where it has been understood for a much longer time that a work of art may be shown to be a process as well as a product.

In the film, *L’Année dernière à Marienbad* (1961), director Alain Resnais achieved this effect of the creative process by alienating the spectator from the movie through a variety of techniques: re-echoing of scenes by verbal and visual juxtaposition of details; interpolation of flashbacks, some so brief as to be almost subliminal; dream sequences; rhythmical repetition of images and the use of several alternate denouements. The result of these devices seems to be to distinguish representation from reality, to define the true context of the particular art form. Robbe-Grillet wrote the script for this film in its entirety and, as in his

own *ciné-roman* and film, *L'Immortelle* (1963), he provided a shot by shot description of the film as he imagined it, including camera movements, sound, music and dialogue. In these films as in his novel, *La Jalousie*, Robbe-Grillet's images depict subjective life, not outer reality. Since the events are happening in someone's mind, the images follow no normal chronological or logical sequence but the para-logic of a dream. The universe in these films and novels is in a perpetual present tense.

There seems to be a relationship between the interest of these authors in the film medium and their *nouveau roman* techniques. Thus while in the past many novelists have written for film, none has shown such affinities between the techniques of their two media. In addition to Robbe-Grillet's collaboration with Renais we also have that of Marguerite Duras with her scripting of his film, *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959). Godbout himself has several films to his credit — among them: *Huit témoins* (1964), *Yul 871* (1966), and *Kid Sentiment* (1967), for the National Film Board. Speaking about himself Godbout has stated, "Ce que je puis affirmer aujourd'hui c'est que le cinéaste fait vivre l'écrivain; aussi bien au plan financier qu'à celui des contacts avec la réalité."³

Just as the film director manipulates the camera lens to give us a unique but relative point of view, the *nouveau roman* author controls his first person narrator for the same effect. He has rejected the device of the traditional omniscient narrator. Since we no longer really believe in this convention of representing fictional reality Nathalie Sarraute declares that:

selon toute apparence, non seulement le romancier ne croit plus guère à ses personnages, mais le lecteur, de son côté, n'arrive plus à y croire... Nous sommes entrés dans l'ère du soupçon.⁴

IF WE LOOK AT Godbout's treatment of the elements of time, memory, language and objects, especially by the use of cinematic techniques, we see that *Le couteau sur la table* deals with the interior reality of mental process, the rhythm and flow of emotion. Time is the one great dimension against which Godbout's novel brings all its resources to bear. Traditionally novelists narrated events in cosmic time and thus generally followed the linear movement of the sun, the calendar and the clock. These novelists made it quite clear when they deviated from chronology by flashbacks and recollections. Godbout has flagrantly broken this conventional time sequence. In trying to redefine the proper territory of fiction in response to the challenge of scientific knowledge and social and

political change in Canada and the world, Godbout has asserted the importance of the role of imagination.

The action in Godbout's novel takes place in the reflective consciousness of the novelist. The author's memory and imagination are used to dramatize the process of creation. This involves a partial or total disconnection of the mind from events of the external world and from public time. An important element of the independence of the reflective consciousness is thus its capacity for denying the chronology of the past. The new order which the mind inevitably gives to events will be more personal and revealing about the narrator. In *Le couteau sur la table*, then, we seem to be dealing with at least two time scales: cosmic time, the time of public reference, and private or phenomenological time, that of individual experience.

In Butor's *La Modification* time is manipulated by using the device of a railway journey between Paris and Rome. In Godbout's *nouveau roman* a central image is the railway trip of the protagonist-narrator and his girlfriend, Patricia. This train, which comes from Vancouver and crosses the map of Canada, moves through real points in space and historical time: Medicine Hat, Qu'Appelle, Assiniboia, Neepawa, Kingston, Long Sault. This journey, the measured routine of army life, references to years and to the ages of himself, Patricia and Madeleine, are points in public time against which the mind of the narrator can move freely. The narrator's first weekend meeting with Patricia is iterated over and over again in his mind, irrespective of the clock. All their weekends are one weekend that exists outside of calendar time. These are sojourns in an artificial space:

Si les oasis ont toujours quelque chose d'artificiel, une allure figuée. . . . L'artifice du Lake était attachant. . . .

The love of the French-Canadian narrator and the Anglophone Patricia exists in an oasis, artificially created, outside public time and space, as if it were only possible in such an incubator. This seems to be why the narrator can leave Patricia and then return to her and start the association all over again. In a sense their relationship never stopped, since it exists outside calendar time. The reality of their love is a mental creation of the narrator, an image that moves irrespective of the seasons which shift freely from one paragraph to the next in the novel.

Despite the freedom of the reflective consciousness, the relationship of the narrator and Patricia has limitations, even in the mind:

C'était un amour curieux et presque à sens unique: je rêvais d'elle toute la semaine, mais parce que nous étions de langue et de culture différentes j'avais peine à imaginer ses jours, ses pensées, son enfance.

The imagination of the narrator seems unable to transcend the cultural differences of French and English and the lack of shared experiences, all of which exist in public time. The imagination needs memory and memory exists in time. In the reality of time the narrator confronts the impossible, the incommunicability that exists between two beings. And thus despite his love, Patricia always remains a stranger to the narrator who himself remains nameless:

Je n'arrive pas à m'expliquer ce besoin que j'avais d'une femme qui me fût à ce point étrangère... une peau nordique... des cheveux d'un blond nordique... j'allais pouvoir m'acheter une identité.

The narrator moves caressingly over Patricia's lovely, white body as the train moves over the map of Canada: all unknown entities. Patricia's body, like the geography of the nation, is constantly being rediscovered:

Patricia demeure toujours trop longtemps sous la douche, comme si elle n'en avait jamais fini de retrouver sa virginité ou son teint.

While the French narrator seeks his identity in Patricia's Anglo-Saxon body, the reality of physical contact, and while he sees this girl as "le moyen terme par lequel j'entre en contact charnel avec les cent quatre-vingt-dix millions d'individus qui m'entourent," he also sees her as an escape into oblivion: "Patricia, viens déshabille-toi, viens au lit éteins la lumière fais le vide j'ai besoin de vide de noir de désir tiens lèche ma main." Is this the self-annihilation that French Canada fears from too much association with the mass of North American English culture? With the necessity of contact comes the risk of assimilation.

Je suis bien en toi, dans toi, collé à ton corps je t'aime Patricia j'aime ta peau, le grain de ta peau... Je suis bien dans ta peau.

As the close-up views of Patricia's skin indicate, the narrator is attracted by her affluence and beauty but on another level he is also repelled by her and seeks consolation in the working class French-Canadian, Madeleine.

While the mind of the narrator moves freely in space, manipulating time, it also confronts us with reminders of the linear time-scale. The news story in the first chapter from (note the title) *Time* magazine draws us into public reality. This ominous note about American nuclear weapons and the other news references in the novel to plane crashes and FLQ bombings create a doomful pattern

in the time-free movement of the narration. To these emblems of death is added the narrator's consciousness of his own mortality and his fear of extinction:

J'ai peur de mourir tout à coup, j'ai peur . . . de crever sans avoir fait un seul geste qui soit humain, sans laisser derrière moi autre chose que moi qui refroidis, moi qui pourris, moi humus dans le roc et la glaise. . . . Demain je meurs: qui saura que j'aurai existé?

The irrepressible force of time hits the narrator most strongly with the meaningless death of Madeleine. Not only does the narrator find himself in the horrible loneliness which, like Pascal, he has dreaded throughout his life but he realizes that with the death of Madeleine's unborn child, his child, his fight against time has been frustrated. His wish to transcend time and his death by perpetuating himself in the creation of new life has died with Madeleine:

Madeleine qui aimait la vie mourait stupidement; mais ce qui me terrifiait le plus . . . c'était surtout ce silence énorme, inattendu; Madeleine mon amour ne pouvait désormais ajouter un mot à ce qu'elle avait dit, ne pouvait plus *répondre*, ne pouvait donner naissance à ce fils que . . .

This constant, and often sudden, juxtaposition of phenomenological time with public time creates a pattern of tension, a poetic pattern in the novel that has a subliminal effect on us much like the films of Renais, Lefebvre and Godbout himself. The reflective consciousness struggles against linear time by producing an artifact that has dimensions outside time. Godbout's fascination with the problem of time in literature and film is shown in his essay, "Le Temps: La Poésie du Cinéma."

Le pouvoir de suggestion de la poésie peut donner naissance au pouvoir d'exploration du temps qui appartient au cinéma.

Les arts ne sont, comme les religions, que des tentatives désespérées de contrôler le temps.

La qualité de la vie d'un peuple ne dépend plus aujourd'hui que du choix qu'il fait dans son emploi du temps.⁵

THE ELEMENT most closely associated with time in the creative consciousness is the memory. In *Le couteau sur la table* the workings of the memory are exercised through interior monologue, involuntary memory and a kind of subliminal recall. Godbout's interior monologues are not in long Joyce-

ian tirades since, in a sense, the whole novel is a monologue. But we do have repeated use of mental digressions, and digressions within digressions, to which Godbout draws our attention by the use of parentheses and ellipses. By this narrative mode the action remains in the narrator's mind, and thus it is his consciousness that informs the entire novel. The time shifts, the juxtapositions of the narrator's return to Patricia with the death of Madeleine or with another memory, explore the operations of the mind speaking to itself. Every time the narrator recalls his reunion with Patricia his mind associates parts of their conversation with a different object or sensation. The narrator's dialogues with Patricia are reconstructed in various ways as the mind plays freely with time and space. With these repeated recompositions of the mind Godbout is drawing attention to the fact that his non-linear narrative is the creation of a consciousness temporarily disconnected from the reality of conventional dimensions of time and space. In Godbout's *nouveau roman*, as in Godfrey's *The New Ancestors*, the play of the mind as embodied in the narrative is constituted by the freedom to rearrange images or memories of the past without reference to a perceived reality.

Godbout's protagonist-narrator demonstrates instances of involuntary memory. Like Marcel in Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*, the narrator fixes his mind on an object or physical sensation which in turn initiates the unintentional recall of a series of associations and memories. The narrator could be kissing Patricia, or observing her taking a shower or getting dressed and the mental process begins:

Patricia met sa robe avec l'attention délicate des fleurs filmées au ralenti et se transforme en tache de sang contre le mur, en salvia, comme il y en avait au pied des baraquements de l'Intendance.

The action of Patricia dressing makes the narrator think of a flower filmed in slow motion, a blood stain and finally the salvia near the army barracks and the associated unpleasant recollections of army life. With this cinematic technique of the transformation of one image into another we see that the process is not logical but psychological. Did the narrator leave the restrictions of the army only to become captive to Patricia's sensuality?

At other times the involuntary memory seems to operate at a subliminal level in which the narrator is not fully conscious of the significance of the objects to which his mind keeps returning. Several images, which recur in the course of the narration and which go almost unnoticed, culminate in a climax that is brought

to crisis by the shock of Madeleine's accidental death. Several times in the novel the narrator mentions that he hears a cry. The idea of breath and suffocation reappears. If Patricia is finally killed, the narrator has strangled her. The image of an abandoned child occurs in several places. Madeleine's unborn baby is, in a sense, a lost child.

L'appel strident des sirènes. . . .

Le cri d'un enfant va se répercutant dans la ville devenue boîte à écho.

. . . .

Seul, se retrouver seul comme un enfant abandonné par son équipe et qui ne peut plus jouer, seul, face au vent vert et frais des collines rasées. . . .

The subtle repetition of such images throughout the novel reflects elements of the narrator's subconscious. There seems to be a memory in the narrator's mind which he is either trying to forget or recall or both. In the climax of chapter 75, the narrator's horror of being left alone, abandoned, and his fear of death are brought to the surface in a series of triple repetitions and an hallucination. The narrator's response to seeing Madeleine's dead body is one of suffering:

J'avais mal au coeur et le besoin de m'oxygéner l'emporta . . . et derrière j'entendais les cris de mon fils peut-être.

. . . .

De temps à autres l'appel guttural comme celui d'une poulie roullée, d'un faisán caché dans les buissons, m'était prétexte à reprendre haleine. . . .

This paragraph is followed by a parenthetical digression which seems to be an hallucination of an incident in the narrator's past:

Je suis seul, incapable de courir, je recule épouvanté, de plus en plus vite, à mesure que la peur gagne . . . de temps à autre le cri guttural d'une sorcière dont je reconnais les traits sans pouvoir la nommer me force à reprendre haleine. . . .

This series of associations is followed by a childhood memory of the narrator lost in the snow storm at five years of age:

Dans la neige cette fois. J'ai cinq ans. Je ne vois rien dans la tempête ni ma mère . . . j'entends le cri guttural d'un homme qui hurle à perdre haleine. . . . Une chambre d'hôpital . . . le linge est blanc et la main de ma mère; je me rendors.

The lost child is not only the narrator at five but also the narrator's child. The *cri* is both their cries. But while, for the narrator, the blinding whiteness of the snow storm has become the white comfort of the bedsheets, either with his mother

holding his hand or with Patricia, for his child, the breath has been stopped forever.

But there is something more going on in this cinematic repetition and juxtaposition of images. Is it possible to see these memories of the child abandoned by his team as a racial memory of French Canada? Is it possible to associate the fear of being lost in the snow, the narrator's horror of death without progeny and of suffocation, with the natural instinct of a race for perpetuating itself physically and culturally? One recalls Jean-Pierre Lefebvre's film, *Jusqu'au cœur*, with its repeated colour shots of frogs being swallowed by larger animals of prey.

THE CINEMA-LIKE TECHNIQUES which show the operation of the memory are successful devices for communicating the process of the reflective consciousness because they always use objects of the external, visual world in which to anchor the emotional import of the thoughts. In Godbout's *nouveau roman* the objects are the contents of the narrator's consciousness, which can be roughly identified with that of the author himself. Without the objects there would be no self in the novel and without a self no objects. As in a film, this presence of selected things in the work is evidence that a reflective mind is there to sustain them. Objects such as Patricia's red dress, the bed, the artificial lake, the C.N. train and the knife, that have become the property of the consciousness, are significant for that consciousness.

In *Le couteau sur la table* the mode of narration is an implicit one, the narrator remains silent on the explicit meaning of the stream of objects, images and events of which the novel is an inventory. As in the film, *L'Année dernière à Marienbad*, the responsibility for abstraction is surrendered to each member of the audience, who can at least be confident that each one of the images or objects is of significance. Since in the *nouveau roman* the narrator is stripped of his traditional powers of conceptualization, the communication relies on the mental picture formed by the reader, sometimes only on the subliminal level. By this elimination of the intermediary presence, Godbout is attempting a more immediate mode of fiction in which the reader is confronted by the contents of another consciousness, objects assembled with an artistic intent. Godbout is narrating with the unique but relative point of view of the camera lens.

The visual orientation of the narrator is constantly evident. Early in the novel he caresses Patricia's naked body with his eyes:

Je la suis des yeux, dans une caresse avouée; son dos blanc rayé par les taches de lumière que le store vénitien laisse couler entre des lames horizontales, un corps zébré, puis le noir, l'ombre. . . .

The final close-up images in the novel emphasize the visual perspective:

Le couteau restera sur la table de la cuisine. Aucune trace de sang sur les tapis.

The ambivalence of the knife image is reinforced by its visual quality. The violence suggested by the knife seems to be tempered by its position on the kitchen table. Is the knife for dining or killing or for both?

As in the stream of consciousness work of Proust and Joyce, in Godbout's *nouveau roman* the powers of the mind and language are combinatory rather than inventive. The imagination has to work with public facts that have been absorbed into the individual consciousness and retained in the memory. It is the discontinuity of these objects and our language, a discontinuity reflected in our direct perceptions of the external world, which enables us to select and combine them into a fiction. It is this technique of direct perception that Godbout demonstrates in his film, *Kid Sentiment*, a *cinéma-vérité* work that gives the impression that it has produced itself. Godbout then operates poetically in prose and film since, "The poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination."⁶

In his work Godbout upholds the freedom of the mind, a free mind which bestows significance on things by the use of language. The literary artist uses language to transform a world which is desacralized, demythologized, a world which no longer has absolute or essential meaning. Godbout has said:

L'écriture littéraire est une exploration du langage, comme on dit que les cosmonautes explorent l'espace. Il y a un espace dans les mots, entre les mots, que l'écrivain fouille. . . .

. . . .

L'écriture veut faire dégorger les mots. Le cinéma veut faire dégorger le temps. La problématique du langage, sondée par le style d'un écrivain, donne l'oeuvre littéraire.

. . . .

C'est à ce point précis que l'écriture littéraire et le cinéma se peuvent rejoindre: dans la poésie.⁷

By trying to employ language in a way similar to that in which a film-maker uses time, Godbout, like McLuhan, is anticipating changes in perception and sensibility that have yet to come to pass. Thus just as the protagonist-narrator in *Le*

couteau sur la table is struggling with the stereotypes of English and French, so Godbout in his *nouveau roman* is rebelling against literary habits, against formal stereotypes which have come to be accepted in Canadian literature as representative and indispensable rather than relative. To the authors of the *nouveau roman*, both in France and in Canada, the novel is in need of redefinition, and the responsibility of the writer is to show the function and form of fiction, and by extension, what the role of the imagination is in our lives. But this is both a difficult and dangerous experiment for to change aesthetic conventions is ultimately to help in changing reality. Godbout himself has been quoted as saying:

J'écris pour les mêmes raisons qui font que j'aime, que je marche, que je lis, que j'agis; pour connaître.

. . . .

Le roman d'aujourd'hui ne peut être qu'une façon de vivre c'est-à-dire, je crois, de connaître d'expérimenter la vie dans le mystère de l'oeuvre d'art, et souvent d'être heureux.⁸

NOTES

- ¹ Ronald Sutherland, "The Fourth Separatism," *Canadian Literature*, No. 45: 7-23, and also in *Second Image*, 1971, briefly discusses the theme of Godbout's novel as do: Maurice Blain, "Conscience de l'Étrangeté," *Cité Libre*, XV, No. 76 (Avril, 1965), 29-32 and René Garneau, "Révolte plutôt que révolution," in *Présence de la critique*, ed. Gilles Marcotte, 1966.
- ² This is clearer in the French edition, used throughout this essay (Montreal: Editions du Seuil, 1965). The McClelland and Stewart edition of Penny Williams' translation is somewhat adequate.
- ³ "Le Temps: La Poésie du Cinéma," *Canadian Literature*, No. 46, p. 84.
- ⁴ *L'ère du soupçon: essais sur le roman*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), pp. 71 and 74.
- ⁵ *Canadian Literature*, op. cit., pp. 85-88.
- ⁶ Roman Jakobson, "Linguistics and Poetics," in *Essays on the Language of Literature*, eds. S. Chatman and S. R. Levin (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967), p. 303.
- ⁷ "Le Temps: La Poésie du Cinéma," op. cit., p. 85.
- ⁸ In Réjean Robideaux, "Une approche du 'Nouveau roman'," *Incidences: revue littéraire*, No. 8 (Mai, 1965), pp. 12-13.