

# THE TWO TRADITIONS

## *Literature and the ferment in Quebec*

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A POWERFUL MOVEMENT is stirring in Québec for secession from the Confederation. A recent questionnaire by the Montreal newspaper *La Presse* revealed that some fifty per cent of the sampled population are already in favour of Québec's separation from the rest of Canada. Yves Thériault the novelist, after a tour of Québec colleges, reported that among the student population the idea of secession or separatism is widespread. It only awaits a Québec political party of secession to raise a storm of major proportions.

This ferment in Québec is largely a concern of literature, because the literary men are deeply involved in the new social unrest. The present nationalistic resentments in Québec present themselves as "interesting" to an intellectual minority which is at the same time carrying out a revolt against the static culture and religious tradition of the Province. This progressive movement, which would seem to be everything that critics of Québec have always hoped for, as the much-needed reform movement here, is capable at the same time of showing a nationalistic will to autonomy and a hostility to English Canada that may be hard to understand. But this is the inevitable result of the failure of English-speaking Canada — and I am thinking of the most literate and conscious part of it — to come to terms with French culture or to create a truly bilingual nation.

Our inability, after one hundred years of Confederation, to create a minimum literacy in two languages throughout Canada — a simple requirement of elementary education — is in fact the first cause of our cultural division and antagonism. What could be the source of untold cultural wealth and enrichment on both sides of the language barrier is considered instead to be an obstacle and a handicap in the work of building a nation.

In the city of Montreal for example, the choice residential area of Westmount, on the slopes of Mount Royal, is occupied exclusively by English-speaking people, while the French occupy the dull tenement flatlands of the east end, Ville Emard, and Verdun. Westmounters do not bother to learn French or to insist on a really effective programme of teaching French in their schools. They do not bother to read French newspapers or French books. They simply ignore their French compatriots.

How long can we expect the French to take this treatment in their own Province and in Canada as a whole? How long will they be satisfied to remain second-class citizens in their own country? (They constitute one-third of the people of Canada, but in our cultural life they are treated as a foreign element, restricted to their Québec reservation.) It is little wonder that many of them now want to take their Province into their own hands, as French-speaking colonies have done in other parts of the world. There is in fact an organized movement for the establishment of a Laurentian Republic, with offices in Montreal on St. Denis Street (east of the barricades of Main Street), where hotheaded nationalists already hold their conclaves and manufacture propaganda. According to Jean-Charles Harvey of *Le Petit Journal*, one part of this movement is of an extreme rightist, or "fascist", character; another part is of the extreme left.

This is of course a complex problem involving the economic interests, religion and customs of a whole people, as well as their language. But language as the organ of communication contains everything else, and our main failure, symptomatic of our refusal, has been in the sphere of language and literature. A basic French-English literacy should long ago have been our national objective. In literature we should by now have a unified literature with two great branches in two languages. There should be interpenetration and exchange between the two languages, shared influences, the transfer of French mother-country traditions and English literary traditions, to create a rich bilingual literary climate. Obviously, scholars and writers cannot be coerced, and should not even be organized to do these things. They should see the opportunity and take it. But English-speaking writers and critics in Canada have for the most part turned a deaf ear to French language requirements; they have too often failed to learn the language — there are authors and scholars among us who "cannot read French"! — and they have simply not read the books of their French contemporaries. The result is estrangement, politeness, and concealed animosity. While the majority of French Canadians remained themselves semi-literate, under the tutelage of a regressive clergy (though, mind you, not all the Church is in reaction, for there

are churchmen in the new movement of reform), the chauvinist English attitude could continue under a mere shadow of resentment; but a true cultural awakening means an awakening also to the failures and condescensions of English Canada toward the realities and potentialities of the French heritage. It is the French Canadian literati who are asking our literati the unpleasant questions. And the answers had better be carefully phrased.

THE FRENCH INTELLECTUAL is asking what French culture might have been, and might still be, in Canada. He suspects that he has been frustrated by English indifference and lack of sympathy for these potentialities. As an adventuresome Frenchman he finds little in the English mind of the sense of adventure; he wants the French spirit to realize a complete awakening here.

So I think the root of the problem of French-English relations in Canada goes deeper than the matter of conquest and political differences. It has to do with the relation of French and English literatures and cultures over the centuries and the translation of these attitudes to this continent. The problem of breaking down a deeply inbred cultural habit brought over from England, and also from France, is one that has never yet been considered by our critics. But it is this transplanted rigidity of attitude and behaviour that explains our Two Solitudes and continues behind the present cultural-political crisis brewing in Québec.

Chaucer, who lived at a time when Europe was one civilization and the modern language divisions were just beginning, had his "French Period" and more; like all Middle English writing, he was soaked in French influence, since France was then actually the "mother country" of writing men and singers in England. We have never got over the benefit. The jogging, repetitive iambic, replacing Anglo-Saxon pattern and flux, has been the bane of minor English poetry ever since, some think its very signature; whereas it is not in fact native to the language at all, and is contrary to its true spirit. (English is by nature irregular, and trochaic.) However, with the growth of nationalism and the coming of the Reformation, we can see England separating itself off from the Continent and becoming loggy with insularity. Roger Ascham's scorn for "Italianate" Englishmen already has the pride of wholesome home-grown culture in it. And it is doubtful if Shakespeare knew much French: the plays come out of English sources and translations, a few out of Italian, but none directly out of a French

source. Insularity has been the English characteristic ever since.

The exile of Charles II in France, and then the Restoration, brought French Neo-Classicism as we know into England. But the rationalistic dissociation of thought and imagination was already a mental disease by that time, so that the tinkling heroic couplet, the dry satire, the descent to society and manners, have ever since seemed un-English and un-poetical. However, France made possible English prose, and it helped sweep away the gloom of English Puritanism.

But the main retreat of English culture, one which has lasted until the present and which is contemporary with the history of Canada, begins with the end of Neo-Classicism and the rise of Romanticism. At this point, Germany to some extent replaced France as the land of foreign wonders; but even this was minimal. English Romanticism became a home-grown hothouse plant. The French, since they were the prime exponents of witty eighteenth-century verse and prose, and since their Romanticism was delayed a half-century by the Revolution — a Revolution that England greatly feared — came to be avoided by the English with marked prejudice. The French were unromantic, anti-sentimental, and dangerous. The home of Voltaire was antithetical to English romantic feeling. (Hence the English Romantic poets “did not know enough,” as Arnold later discovered, about French literature.) And when Romanticism decayed into sentimentality and rank idealism, this repulsion further took the form of resistance to “French immorality”.

The rapprochement was further delayed (though a few intrepid souls, like Swinburne and Arthur Symonds, broke the sound-barrier) when the Damned Poets, following Baudelaire, cut away from foetid Romanticism and began those antics that we recognize as Modern Poetry. England merely recoiled from such a display of bad taste, and it never produced its own Baudelaire or Rimbaud — at least until the twentieth century. It was only in 1910 that the work of Laforgue, Corbière, and Rimbaud became the springboard for the American-English poets Eliot and Pound. In fact, the pure starch did not come out of English poetry, despite Edith Sitwell, until Dylan Thomas hit it off in 1934. Efforts since then to Millerize and Surrealize, with the help of D. H. Lawrence and French Existentialism, only reveal how deep-rooted are the cultural habits of Imperial conservatism. To join with the French mind is to be enlightened and to be free, something very difficult, perhaps impossible, for the educated gentlemen of England.

To come back to Canada, the literature of this country begins in rotten romanticism, and rotten romanticism is a benighted anti-French movement. Neither Carman nor Lampman knew anything about the dark currents then

surging in French and European literature. Thus Cappon could write —

For the poetry of Roberts at this period, like Canadian poetry in general, still holds by the old ethical traditions of the great English and American schools of the previous generation. It is virtually unstirred by the subtle reactions of thought which belong to our latest modern schools of verse, by the love of ethical paradox and the neurotic delicacy of sensibility which, for example, characterize the French Verlaines and Mallarmés of the time.<sup>1</sup>

Since then, Canada has developed a form of English genteel culture, patterned on that of England, which is immune to intellectual aliveness, to speculative ideas, to experimental living, or to exploratory writing. Our best English culture has been conservative, cautious, dead-set on traditional values and the advantages of prestige. In short, it has been all-square, or as the Beats say, real cube.

On the other hand, we cannot blame the French *habitant*, illiterate, on the land, cut off from the Revolution by the clergy, cut off from France by the English, for falling into a backwater and for refusing to be enlightened by English culture. He preferred to refuse all culture — but his own wonderful folk spirit, of laughter and farce — for about a century and a half. And it is the English who are to blame, for not opening the door to a true French enlightenment.

We may leave the politicians, the industrialists, and even the people, out of the picture. The educated minority in Canada are the ones who need to become aware of an historic opportunity that has always been lying before them, waiting to be taken up. It is simply the possibility of bringing the great French and the great English traditions of literature face to face, not in the work of some one complex writer, but in an entire culture.

This can be done. It does not mean the assimilation of cultures one to another. It does not mean that the French must lose their character and integrity. They must deepen their character and integrity as they are now doing, in *Liberté* and *Cité Libre*, and in the small publishing houses of Editions du Jour, Editions de l'Homme, Hexagone, and Editions Quartz, where they become more thoroughly themselves by close contact with the new literature from France. French-Canadian culture does not consist of pea-soup, black soutane, or raquetteur's sweater; it consists of *la douce France* reborn and forever living in French Québec.

Dans nos gaietés, dans nos souffrances,  
 Dans nos chansons, on rest' Français.  
 Et quand on prie l'Dieu d'nos croyances,

<sup>1</sup> James Cappon, *Robert and the Influences of his Time*, Toronto, 1905, p. 62.

C'est p't-être en mots mal prononcés;  
 C'est en vieux mots qui vienn'nt de France  
 Et qu'les aïeux nous ont laissés.  
 Et quand on entend: "Viv' la France"  
 Nos cœurs de gueux sont boul'versés.<sup>2</sup>

But to build our literature, the literati must work to become thoroughly versed both in the mother-literature of the other language and in the current literature of both parts of contemporary Canada. Is it asking too much? It is merely the minimum, if we want to survive very long as a nation.

CANADIAN LITERATURE, if we understand it, becomes the whole literature of France and the whole literature of England standing behind the literature of French Canada and the literature of English Canada. We must conceive of it in this large, dramatic frame, if we are to escape from provincialism and if we are to create a new complex civilization in the north. This, and nothing less, must be our aim.

To make a fair beginning, it should be a requirement of every college teacher of the humanities that he be bilingual and bilingually educated. This should be a permanent criterion for employment and for promotion. (Such a test might help eliminate the pressure on publishing papers and books that nobody reads. It would put the pressure instead on reading.) The same criterion should be applied to English and history teachers in the high schools. (At present not even the French teachers can speak French.) The teaching of French should be reformed in our schools, at whatever cost, on the pattern of language-teaching in the armed forces, where a speaking fluency has been achieved in a very short time. The objective should be speaking and reading ability, not the passing of grammatical examinations. If a large national programme of this kind were undertaken the results would be immediate and permanently beneficial.

The reason why we should emphasize the learning of French and familiarity with French and French-Canadian literature is that the French intellectuals already know English. The pressure to learn English in French Canada is already strong, and it already presents a sufficient educational and economic advantage.

<sup>2</sup> Jean Narrache, *J'Parle tout seul*, Les Éditions de l'Homme, Montreal, 1961.

Only a freshening-up of the educational system is needed to make the efficient teaching of English a natural result. The English, on the other hand, need to know the advantage, or rather the necessity, of learning French. They must learn now, or never.

The crisis in Québec is one in which an intellectual minority is carrying out a revolt against the static traditionalism of their own people. These reformers want a separation of Church and State; they want schools independent of the Catholic Church or of any church; they want democracy and justice for minority groups; they want a diversity of opinions, honest journalism, complex art; they want equal taxation, not based on religious affiliation and church membership; they want civil marriages to be legalized; they want the legal oath to be available to the agnostic and non-believer, as it is not at present; they want legal adoption to be free of religious trammels, so that a Protestant mother can adopt a child born illegitimately to a Catholic girl; they want specific and general reforms in education, in the law, in journalism, in literature, in the life of French Canada.

The programmes and directions of this movement are to be found in such books as the satirical best-seller *Frère Untel*; in the brilliant work of satire by Carl Dubuc, *Les Doléances du Notaire Poupart*; in the periodical *Liberté*, edited by Jacques Godbout, and in *Cité Libre*; in the newspaper *Le Devoir* (or even at times in *La Presse*, *La Patrie*, or the newly-founded *Nouveau Journal*); in the volumes of essays titled *Ecrits du Canada Français*; in the publications of Editions de l'Homme, and of Editions du Jour, under Jacques Hébert, notably the collection of essays in *L'Ecole Laïque*, edited by Robert Elie; and in the poetry and prose writing of young French Canada. There is powerful writing, exciting reading here, not of the concocted controversial kind common to English Canadianism (cf. *Maclean's* "For the Sake of Argument"), but passionate debate and persuasion, for the sake of justice, for the sake of truth.

This constructive and progressive intellectual ferment in French Canada is a precious and admirable movement of liberation and betterment. It has only one danger. In its prickly aggressiveness and self-assertion, it has shown that it can turn against the old English strawman-chauvinist as much as against the real forces of reaction at home. And the attack on English Canada as the source of all troubles can bring a possible derailing of all these fine energies, since that is an old escape-valve with all the ignorant passions still behind it. The massive majority of Québec have the necessary prejudices, and the rebellious *élite* have the spark that can set off the proverbial powder keg again.

If that should happen, the bright new movement of enlightenment and libera-

tion would be swallowed up in darkness and returning chaos. For one thing, English Canada would perforce be thrown on the side of extreme reaction, in the necessity to join with the moneyed powers and the politicians, against secession. Perhaps the young separatists do not realize that they are playing with fire; perhaps they do. It is possible that they are trying to get a rise out of us: they are so tired of snobbery, indifference, and apathy. Before it is too late, I hope we can help them and join with them in a more promising course — the way to a greater Canada that is literary in two languages and has a literature in two languages. It is the only way to a true originality for both these literatures, and it is also the way to an endless, unexhausted future of creative effort.

