

## SURREALISM AND THE POSTMODERN IN THE QUEBEC LITERARY INSTITUTION

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pour André Belleau

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André G. Bourassa, *Surrealism and Quebec Literature: History of a Cultural Revolution*. Translated by Mark Czarneki, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, p. 374.

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Quebec has not (yet) produced a Great writer; no Gabriel Garcia Marquez, James Joyce or Virginia Woolf, no Nobel Prize winner, no single Great world-class contribution. A similar comment might be aimed at Quebec art. Still, Quebec has its own art and literature which are certainly gaining in international acclaim. To say that a contemporary society has not given birth to a Great author in no way diminishes or degrades the quality of that society's cultural creations. Rather, it invites speculation concerning the relative aesthetic value of the *oeuvres* as attributed by the institution of art and literature on both the national and international scale.

Critical theory teaches us that judgments of the genius of aesthetic creations can only be derived from the specific reflexions of immanent critique. At the same time, however, the legitimation of the product as a Great or average work is only achieved through the institution. While critique of Quebec art and literature has grown to a point where it seems at times to surpass the actual volume of cultural productions, the legitimation of the ensemble of the work is only slowly being achieved. Historically, art and literature in Quebec

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have either been far behind or far ahead of what seems to be occurring elsewhere. My argument is that this internal/external tension is not only a trait of the institution of cultural production in Quebec but more generally founded in the social-historical fabric of the society itself. As a means of elaborating this hypothesis I will first outline a critical approach to the institution of cultural production. Secondly, I will attempt to apply a working definition of aesthetic value to a consideration of the Quebec literary institution by reviewing the English translation of André Bourassa's work, *Surrealism and Quebec Literature*.

### **Cultural Creation as Product and Social Force**

A critical approach to cultural production requires a *dédoublement* (splitting) of presuppositions. Art and literature are seen as both institutional products and as institution. Peter Bürger has shown, how in the 18th and 19th centuries, autonomous (bourgeois) art separated itself from day to day praxis and as such became itself an institution. He goes on to argue that the avant-garde movements of the 20th century must be interpreted as attacks against art and literature as institution.<sup>1</sup> Bürger's analysis privileges the social function of art as the primary object of analysis and consequently tends to downplay the development of the aesthetic discourse within the institution.<sup>2</sup> Internally, the aesthetic practice of the institution works itself out across an open-ended maze of socio-discursive or dialogical relations which are generally referred to as the intertext. Intertextuality here refers to the entire ensemble of preceding and contemporary art and literature as well as to the social discourse bearing on a period; i.e., all that is argued, said or narrated in addition to the arguable, speakable and the narratable in the given society. In any period, art and literature as institution give a definition to the intertext and thereby establish a stratified scale of genres and sub-genres. Themes and narrative styles become the receptacles of social discourse. Art and literature are thus prisons for the hierarchisation of language itself. Aesthetic creations, then, both stratify and are stratified; they are both a social product and a social force. The ambiguity inherent in this presupposition stems, on the one hand, from an attempt to privilege the potentiality of the aesthetic creation and, on the other, to explain the process in which the creation becomes objectified.

Taken a step further, the above discussion of the *dédoublement* between art as social product and as social force must also, at some point, take into account the organizing and regulating practice of the institution. As social products, art and literature have an exchange value. I have no intention of developing an economic theory of cultural products here. Instead, I wish to introduce the analytical polarity between the organizing and aesthetic practices of art and literature which allows us to distinguish them as both products and institution. It is important to keep in mind that these two practices com-

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bine in the creation of a condition of production and that any discussion which holds them to be separate is purely analytical. At one pole, the organizing practice brings together all the materials of the technical and discursive infrastructure of the institution, its system(s) of (re)production and (re)distribution. At the other pole, the imaginary or aesthetic practice brings together all the materials (codes, norms, genres, themes, narrative styles) of the creative act. Given that the theory of intertextuality assumes the audience and the author to be co-creative participants already inserted in the text, it follows that the creative act also structures the possibilities of reception. Although the organizing and aesthetic practices work together in attaining a condition of production/reception, they do not necessarily share the same genesis. For example, aesthetic practices historically predate new organizing technologies and thereby carry a pre-set aesthetic of reception into the actual creation. At the same time, however, the combination of the two practices results in the illusion of *nouveauté*.

### **The Surrealist Aesthetic in Quebec Literature**

Leaving aside the organizing component of the artistic/literary practice, I can now return to the problem I proposed above concerning the relative aesthetic values mediated within the Québec institution. André Bourassa's well-documented history of surrealist literature in Quebec provides an excellent point of departure. Bourassa sets out to demonstrate the Quebec contribution to the surrealist movement, both internally and internationally. Dealing with only written documents (manifestos, poems, plays, articles, correspondence) as source material, Bourassa excludes discussion of visual art but is careful to place the most important surrealist painters (Pellan, Barbeau, Ferron, Riopelle, Borduas) at the centre of the Quebec institution. While the book proclaims itself to be an outline of the ongoing Quebec cultural revolution coinciding with the background of the 1837 Patriot rebellions and continuing across the social movements of the 20th century, there is actually very little discussion of problems in Quebec social history. Its real strength lies in its diligent but typically descriptive historical exposition which traces otherwise inaccessible and often obscure texts to authors within intimate literary and artistic circles. Combining this sort of biography and textual hermeneutics, Bourassa teases out a series of aesthetic values which have slowly emerged to occupy an important position in the Quebec literary and artistic institution over the last century.

### **(Pre)Modernism and the Poetics of Unreason**

Bourassa's work is not limited to a discussion of surrealism proper. He goes beyond the definition of the genre to situation its various sub-genres and

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counter-genres within the intertext of Quebec literature. His overall outline includes three distinct phases as practiced in Quebec literature. His overall outline includes three distinct phases as practiced in Quebec over the last century:

Breton's school as defined in the manifestos from 1924 on; another more generally related to movements such as cubism or revolutionary surrealism; and finally the spontaneous use of surrealism ... as in cathedral gargoyles and African masks ..., the dream imagery of Bosch and Goya or the automatic criting of Achim von Armin and Gérard de Nerval. (p. 1)

Actually, all three of the surrealist phases owe at least a common debt of definition to Breton who was the first to outline the movement's philosophy as a "state of mind". Still, Bourassa is anxious to point out that surrealism does not begin with Breton nor is it ideologically consistent across its several phases. Because its boundaries are fluid, its relations to other movements (romanticism, impressionism, expressionism, etc.) are only loosely defined. Hence, the precise origins of surrealism are difficult to locate. Bourassa begins his survey by situating the Quebec surrealist intertext in the cabalistic, cubo-futurist and dadaist precursors of the period from 1837-1937. Four writers are presented as having contributed to a presurrealist literary revolution by experimenting with cabalistic romanticism: de Gaspé fils, Lenoir, Cremazie and Nelligan. Of the four, the poet Emile Nelligan is perhaps best known. Drawing on dreamlike hallucinations and macabre spiritualism, Nelligan constructs an aesthetic of *unreason*:

On winter nights in my green velour armchair beside the hearth, an enormous ghost sat smoking my clay pipe under the iron chandelier behind my funeral screen ... .

When I asked him his name, my voice booming out like a cannon, the skeleton bit his purple lip, stood and, point at the clock, howled out his name behind my funeral screen. (p. 11)

Unlike cabalistic romanticism which drew heavily on local mythology, the cubo-futurists and dadaist influences were imported by a handful of authors who studied abroad (Delahaye, Dugas, Grandbois, Garneau). Surrealism proper, as both a social and artistic movement, did not cement itself in Quebec until the early 1940s — almost 20 years after Breton's manifestos. As artists and authors retreated from Europe in 1940, a very special cultural break occurred. Beginning with the innovative collaboration between the painter

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Alfred Pellan and the poet Alain Grandbois, continuing through the autonomist writers around Paul-Émile Borduas and later to Gaston Miron and the founding of the poetry group *Hexagone*, surrealism in Quebec emerged very quickly as a generalized political refusal as much as an institutional aesthetic break. In their political forms, the Borduas manifestos (*Rupture inaugurale*, *Refus global*, *Projections libérantes*) shook the intellectual formation of a society dominated by a traditional political and clerical elite. In their aesthetic form, the autonomist writers and painters were ridding themselves of the barriers formed by the Quebec institution of art and literature itself (galleries, schools, publishing houses, critics, etc.).

### **Postmodernism and the Surreational Break**

Emerging aesthetic values in the Quebec literary institution, much like the values of its social institution, were caught in the transition from the modern to the postmodern. This transition implies a shift from the formalism included in the break from representation, and the resulting tendency of self-referentiality in modernism, to the anti-formalism and the free play of desire at the base of the postmodern aesthetic. As Scott Lash defines it: "Postmodern art draws on uncoded and semi-coded libido in the unconscious to produce a literature and fine arts that break with the classical aesthetics of representation and with the formalism of modernity."<sup>3</sup> The first traces of this shift in the Quebec institution are found in the autonomist movement and the plea to move beyond surrealism to a surreational aesthetic.

Bourassa presents Claude Gauvreau, a member of the *Refus global* group, as the key autonomist literary figure of the period. Gauvreau's definition of the autonomist aesthetic is distinctly postmodern in that it demands that "the materials of the creative act (be) furnished exclusively by the free play of the unconscious." He pleads for a surreational break from surrealism proper, arguing that the former "takes place in a particular emotional state", whereas the latter requires an emotional neutrality on the part of the author. According to Gauvreau, the contribution of the Quebec autonomist movement is its surreationalism and the critical attitude which accompanies the "emotional state" of its aesthetic practice. Founded then in the transition between modernism and postmodernism, Gauvreau attempts to push the mechanical/bodily and the physic/emotionless forms of surrealism through to a surreational state in the realm of pure desire. His work is especially marked by a lyrical form, typical of the *Refus global* group, which is itself an attempt to break through to the surreational level.

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The moon will go down on my belly and the reply will flow from the squeezed udder of the star.

The celestial creamery toils all night and the bright liquid flows from every corner in the universal sleep.

Only drowned people can smell it.

And the largest breast of all bloom in the center. It is the moon.  
(p. 109).

Thus, even though the modernist aspects of surrealism take on a particular importance in the drive toward Quebec's Quiet Revolution, certain elements of the postmodern aesthetic also begin to appear in the same historical fold. Actually Quebec's first and perhaps most complete post-modernist writer is generally recognized as Hubert Aquin. Metafiction, mixed narrative, auto-representation, minimalism, maximalism, *mise en abîme*, are among some of the most common postmodern characteristics found in his work. Anne Hébert, Nicole Brossard, Victor-Lévy Beaulieu and other contemporary Quebec writers also gravitate toward postmodernism at times. Indeed, the proliferation of postmodernism can be discerned in a wide variety of new literary and critical/cultural reviews dating from the founding of *Liberté* through the *Parti Pris* era and into the most contemporary publications such as *Dérives*, *Spirale*, *Vice Versa*, *Autrement*, *XYZ*, *La Nouvelle Barre du Jour* and *Possibles*. Still, to situate the first traces of the postmodern aesthetic in the Quebec literary institution one must return to the autonomist movement of the 40's and 50's. Its impact on the evolution of aesthetic values in the Quebec literary and artistic institution has been central. Bourassa's work takes an important step in defining the historical parameters of the movement.

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### Notes

1. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984): "The Institution of Art as a Category in the Sociology of Literature". *Cultural Critique* no. 2 (1985-86) pp. 5-33.
2. Cf. Pierre Zima, *Manuel de sociocritique* (Paris: Picard, 1985).
3. Scott Lash, "Postmodernity and Desire" *Theory and Society* Vol 14, n° 1, pp. 1-33, 1985.