

Despair as Oppositional Practice: Writing the Minority Within Québec's English Minorityⁱ

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Writing in Canada, not to mention Quebec, is in crisis. And not only from a commercial point of view. In spite of, and in some ways because of longstanding if minimal government support and a period of commercial and critical success extending, for a few well packaged authors, to the international market, the critical, aesthetic, social and political edge of literature in this country has gradually been worn smooth and dull.

I do not mean to say that there are not a number of individuals and even small groups of writers doing important work to expand the possibilities of language, to slip free of the bounds of convention, to critically challenge the status quo; simply, that these traditionally marginalized elements are now working in increasingly difficult circumstances and their marginalization is greater than it has been for several decades. Because their writing practice goes largely unrecognized, in addition to worrying about supporting themselves, these few writers are confronted with the attendant doubts about the value of their work. Whereas I admit the distinct possibility that history will judge my work as simply not worthy of support, in the interim I have little choice but to proceed as though my difficulties are the result of my political and aesthetic convictions.

The situation is not so different in Québec. Where once, literature was synonymous with iconic figures of rebellion like Gauvreau, Aquin, Brossard and Blais, we are now into the era of Cirque du soleil. Culture has become an exportable commodity. The Quiet Revolution has gradually been muted to a whisper.

At the same time, and the two are closely connected, both Canadian and Québec societies as a whole have drifted into a state of bourgeois complacency and a self-interested support for the murderous world-wide racist crusade of American imperialism. As we sit together in polite conversation within the polished halls of McGill University, historic bastion of English domination in Québec, Canadian mercenary troops are engaged in killing Afghan women, children and freedom fighters. In the growing international polarization, Canadians and Québécois seem happy to side with the powerful, to follow in the wake of the US armies and collect the scraps on the battle field.¹

The loss of creative literary power, I mean the power to move language and one's own thinking through a writing practice is manifest in many forms. Mainstream fiction, content to tell stories of individual triumph that define happiness as a slice of the pie, aspires to be good bedtime reading — calming, reassuring, soporific.² Most poetry offers itself as decoration, tiny moments of gratification, reaffirming the illusion of solid subjectivity and prettifying the status quo. Canadian stages are sagging under the weight of salon furniture and kitchen sinks. (Québec theatre and dance, at least, continue to offer alternatives in the performance field.)

Over time, even strategies of resistance inevitably lose their sting, are assimilated into the mainstream. Writing grounded in identity politics, once briefly emancipatory, has been honed into a single repetitive narrative of individual and individualist triumph. The

¹ Even for those of us who take personal consolation in how we voted or have signed a petition, it's pretty much business as usual.

² Canadian fiction, having made a name for itself in the dusty category of fine writing, is fast losing ground in the market place to faster pre-digested forms of fiction and non-fiction. The cultural establishment gamely continues its weary defense of literary style, as though cod liver oil could serve as a defense against the viral invasion of commercial pulp. What are they defending? Perhaps we need to explore further in the direction laid out by Beckett, but without the Cartesian nostalgia that ground him to a halt.

virtually identical narrative of the immigrant experience — hardship in the old country, hardship in the new country, individual triumph and inclusion — is repeated now in book after book dressed up in more or less different accents and national costumes.

Occasionally the literary establishment cracks the door to select from among the writers of color, those that are prepared to accommodate.

Experimental writing, whatever the genre or mixture of genre has become a genre in itself, undifferentiated, a harmlessly clever entertainment. Any new non-conforming work that falls outside the discursive formation, outside the category of experimental writing, recognizable because it employs one of a handful of historically canonized techniques (collage, chance operations, homophony, and other playfully self-imposed formal constraints), is invisible.

But I am generalizing. Bush-hogging the terrain. Some excellent, dedicated writers may mistakenly feel targeted. What I mean is that too much of what passes as experimental, or avant-garde, or even literary lacks any sense of urgency. It is that urgency — whether it is expressed as rage or ache or despair or even extreme, maniacal attention to detail — that ethical underpinning that is lacking in so much writing. Without it Art, as an anonymous graffiti once put it, is just a boy's name.

Within the English writing community in Québec, it is still possible to argue there is no unity. In spite of organizational efforts to group English wagons into an ever tighter circle, and a great deal of concrete institution building, a few dissident voices persist. Those of us writing in English have choices: we can come together in language based organizations, devote our time and energy, not to mention government funding, to study

ways to market our work through better branding. We can continue to build institutions patterned on the old fortresses of the English minority in Québec, reaching out over the heads of the Francophone majority to produce events on an international scale, and raising the banner of multilingualism as a way to undermine the role of French. We can let Fear run below the surface of all our writing: fear of the other, the majority; fear of losing privilege, fear of change, of the future, of shifting boundaries and blurring lines of demarcation.

And yet, as I and others have argued in the past, the particular situation of English language writers in Québec opens up opportunities for a vigorous life affirming artistic practice, a radical attention to language, to the way it constructs us and our possible relationship to the world. The search for a way or ways to explore this opportunity has been the work of a persistent if small minority within the minority of English language writers in Québec. And that exploration has produced a number of valuable textual experiments deploying a variety of writing strategies and concerns.

For several years, I have thought of myself as part of that minority-within-a-minority. Today, in large part because of that stance, I find my working and living conditions have become increasingly difficult. I accept as normal the fact of being marginalized within the Anglophone community, and viewed with a mixture of bemusement and suspicion by the Francophone majority. I understand the effect of that position on my chances of winning grants or residencies or other forms of financial support. My isolation and the lack of support for my writing has so far failed to silence me, though it has unquestioningly slowed my progress and limited my production, not to mention my life

expectancy. My commitment has compelled me and, I believe, other writers engaged in a similar kind of experimental work to question our assumptions and writing practice and to look for new strategies to cope with the evolving situation. The question of the unity and organization of this minority-within-a-minority also poses itself. Perhaps those few individual writers engaged in one form or another of resistant practice would fare better if they were able to constitute a kind of school among themselves.

Of course, the development of trends, schools, or other forms of regrouping depends to a large degree on the existence or absence of the necessary objective historical conditions. A further difficulty lies in establishing the content and form of such a unity that would be consistent with the anti-hierarchical, decentred kind of artistic practice of its members.

In the absence of favourable conditions, a number of strategic solutions that hold out the promise of community become understandably tempting to a solitary citizen writing in English in a minor key in Québec. One of these is the persistent if nostalgic pull of the idea of the avant-garde. I admit to have felt that pull. Of course, reassuring as self-proclamations may be, I realize the idea of the avant-garde belongs to the past, to an idea of progress advancing like an army through history with its scouts and sharpshooters roving ahead. To recognize and draw on past transformative traditions in our work is one thing, but to attempt to reproduce them today is to retreat into an exhausted world view and intellectual elitism. These days, Dada, surrealism, Ubu, though still lovely to see, belong in museums.

More recently, a more fruitful strategic identity position has gained credence among progressives in the advanced capitalist countries. Inspired to a large degree by the

possibilities of constant and rapid global communication offered by the internet on one hand, and the deadly effects of nationalism on the other, the idea of the post-national citizen exercises a strong attraction for writers in my situation, working in local isolation. Seated in a room and a half in front of a computer screen, one can slip out of one's skin, away from the failed nation of Québec and my own insignificant position within it, to be part of something larger.

The support, exchange and mobilization made possible by the web offers a critical advantage to any oppositional practice. Some courageous, groundbreaking writing has been done along the fault line of citizenship as a politico-ethical position, Erin Mouré's *O Ciudadán*, here in Québec, for example. But such work, rather than a providing comfort and self-assurance, requires a willingness to work very hard at destabilizing one's identity and opening up to other cultures and languages (as Mouré does with Galician). Otherwise, The difficulty is that the resulting disembodiment (which more often than not takes place in English) can easily disconnect the English writing "citizen" in Québec from the specific discomfort of his or her linguistic and political situation, a discomfort which is at the heart of the nomadic writer's creative impulse.

In the end, I can't help but feel, this new virtual citizenship risks being not so different from the old cosmopolitanism, which was never accessible except to a very few. It rings hollow, today, after so many sat by their computers and watched their fellow citizens in the Balkans being torn apart hour by hour. For all the talk of borders breaking down, Europeans did not put down their tools and laptops to march en masse on Sarajevo, and put an end to the violence by sheer numbers of empty-handed bodies. The WWW, still an

exclusive toy of the rich and powerful, offers the promise of unlimited potential for knowledge sharing and collective resistance, if it doesn't first become a blur of home videos and blabbering opinions. It's especially disconcerting to me to note that the web so far has assumed not so much the rhizomatic shape antihegemonists might have wished, as a more traditional spider trap with the USA at its centre. Even the experimental field is dominated by American practitioners. Though I recognize there is much interesting and important work being done in the heart of imperialism (it's so often the case that art flourishes where the money is), I remain deeply suspicious that any truly oppositional practice can emerge from there. In any case, whether one proclaims cosmopolitanism or post-national citizenship as the latest emancipatory strategy, it has to mean more than a pied-à-terre in Paris, or a way to break into the American book market.

Internationalism is essential. To learn from and build ties with writers, thinkers and activists throughout the world, particularly in areas developing new and useful methods of resistance (Venezuela and Bolivia, currently, for example). To learn their struggles and their languages. To fight for more translations and funding in this country for translations from other languages into French and English. All this, not as a means of denying the difficulty of writing in English, still a dominant and dominating language in Québec, as it has become globally today. Not as a way of stepping away or out of our position of a minority within a minority within Québec.

Alliances and interventions are necessarily loose, temporary, and contextual. It would be overreaching to claim the existence of a trend, much less a school of oppositional writing in a minor key in English in Québec today. More hard work is required (and we know

what substitute exists for that), hard work on the limits and codes imbedded in language, and in literary genres, on the boundaries between those genres, on the very idea of genres.

Serious academic work also: more detailed studies of specific examples of minor writing in English, analysis of the possibilities created by particular experiments and their medium and long-term potential effects on writers and readers, especially when that literary criticism is itself politically charged, rather than tepid close-reading or limited to sociological discussion of the phenomenon of English writing in Québec.

Work also to revive the sense of urgency, to sharpen the pain of our isolation, our despair in the face of American and Canadian barbarism. Because despair too, if it is pure, can be a motivating force. Writing in English in Québec still offers us opportunities to do this work.

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