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Gérard Tougas and Quebec's Literary Destiny

Many of Quebec's contemporary scholars show a marked tendency to treat the creations of their writers in comparative isolation and, in general, take a strongly nationalist approach to any critical study. Two novelists and a poet, Hubert Aquin, Jacques Ferron and Gaston Miron respectively, have been most instrumental in establishing this approach, one that might be best described as the search for a distinct country by dint of the written word. In her collection of critical essays, *Romans du pays*, Gabrielle Poulin refers to some sixty-five novels of a nation-in-the-making. A more abstract expression of this trend in Quebec criticism may be found, furthermore, in the scholarship of Gérard Tougas, who first gained prominence with his extensive and erudite *Histoire de la littérature canadienne-française* published in 1960.

The work I wish to discuss here, *Destin littéraire du Québec*, written some twenty years later, is much more succinct, but it is also weaker in methodology and analysis (Nardocchio 94-95). In this essay, Tougas, like a soothsayer scanning past, present and future, sets out to delineate the various problems facing Quebec literature in the 1980s. His enterprise might best be defined as an effort to answer an all-embracing question: what are the true dimensions of this literature?

For Tougas, Quebec literature is admittedly a very minor part of Western civilization. In today's world then, the critics of this literature may then be distinguished from those representing major cultures by a particular psychological duality: first, they must be versed in the writings of their linguistic partners overseas together with Europe's rich literary store; secondly, their scope will still be quite limited if they do not allow

themselves to become familiar with the American context as well (*DLQ* 11). Important enough in itself, this duality also sheds light on the acute circumstances surrounding Quebec's literary destiny. On the international scene, French Canada plays a minor role in a twofold sense: first of all, it represents a minority within the French-speaking world itself, and then, centred as it is in North America under the direct influence of Anglo-American culture and power, it is beset on all sides by imposing psychological, economic and political constraints (*DLQ* 14).

With respect to Franco-Quebec relations, Tougas examines the many factors that have impeded French Canadian authors in gaining access to the Parisian market. There was, for example, the immense prestige of French culture and a subsequent tendency of the mother country to minimize the importance of her progeny in Africa and America. Then again, the texts of Quebec's writers were frequently, by their very nature, devoted to the question of national emancipation, so that they were often seen as parochial, had great difficulty competing with the works of European and third-world authors. The latter were often the spokespeople of countries exposed to the grim realities of human oppression where the freedoms and standard of living of the Québécois were unheard of (*DLQ* 57).

The major stumbling block for Quebec writers in reaching a European audience was the result of the deep malaise in France in the postwar years: for a nation spiritually weary, acutely aware of the East-West struggle and of the fact that its destiny would henceforth be largely dictated from the outside, Quebec and her concerns seemed of little account (*DLQ* 59). France had now in turn fallen under the direct influence of the American tide. On the literary scene, the former standards of French criticism became thoroughly blurred. For example, in 1980, while American bestsellers were applauded in Paris, an author as exceptional as Claude Simon was grossly lampooned in the French press (*DLQ* 53). There were also the numerous incursions of the English language into French journalism, government services, and so on. France appeared to yield with open arms to the influx of American prose and culture, whereas the Québécois had become past masters at resisting this magnetism. How is it that Hubert Aquin, the most significant writer Quebec has yet produced, was scarcely known abroad while an author like Norman Mailer enjoyed international success? (*DLQ* 20). Faced with such questions, much of Tougas's commentary bemoans the invidious

power of money both in the realm of language and publications as well as in its production of the machinery that builds reputations.

In order to elucidate his subject still further, the author of *Destin littéraire du Québec* examines a number of the world's literatures, emphasizing those of francophone nations. As his principal examples, he chooses Haiti, the tiny island with its particularly acute cultural predicament, and the United States with its predominant role on the world scene. Retracing the principal events in the literary evolution of both these countries along with Quebec's own development, he proceeds to draw a number of striking parallels between each of these two cultures and his own.

The chief lesson gained from Haiti's experience is a linguistic one: though possessing a distinctive language, creole, Haitian writers learned of the advantages of maintaining close contacts with France in the realm of ideas as well as for the wealth of its language, for their own dialect was too limited while French is the literary tongue par excellence (*DLQ* 121).

The United States did not have its creole. The American tongue was simply English modified by several centuries of autonomous living. The republic had been founded on the idea of replacing a privileged class; elitist concepts were therefore overthrown in the name of the values of common humanity. As Walt Whitman foresaw, this nation would extol the steady rise of the average man. By a slow process within their own literature, American authors gradually raised their version of English common speech to the level of the written language of the English of England. In this way, the enormous distance between spoken and written language in traditional prose was, with time, progressively reduced; the spoken idiom of the man-in-the-street furnished the "middle American style" (*DLQ* 101).

With the emergence of the United States as a superpower, these same principles have been propagated far and wide in our time. Though they have doubtless brought many benefits with their appeal to the human majority, Tougas deplores the concomitant vulgarization they have produced, along with disastrous effects upon intellectual life. We have already referred to the impact of blatant publicity, a general social levelling and the overturning of cultural standards visible in present-day France. Fatally, there has been a similar trend towards the vernacular in French prose as well (*DLQ* 72).

Taking stock of these and other pertinent details derived from his impressive research, our author draws a number of conclusions concerning Quebec's own literary destiny. While the use of "joual" has been surrounded with controversy, there has been a good deal of experimentation on the part of Québécois writers in the hope of establishing a suitable prose style; there is no doubt that a unique literary language is being forged. Among modern authors, Gilbert La Rocque through an adept blend of formal and popular language (including an adroit admixture of "joual"), has already shown that Quebec prose had matured.¹ Given the fact that it is the dialect of the Quebec countryside that provides the foundation of this national language, the vehicle of expression in future works will most surely be some form of popular idiom. Since the quiet revolution of the 1960s, the people of Quebec seem to have attained a certain linguistic equilibrium (*DLQ* 124). Through education, the influence of the media and the efforts of the PQ government, the standard of speech in French Canada has been raised considerably; even while its North American resonance remains strong, this speech is now close to the French of France.

In the course of the last two decades, Quebec's media, theatres, libraries, publishing houses, universities, colleges and other institutions have made great strides. Indeed, there has been a remarkable movement of cultural affirmation in every sphere. With the creation of a large independent book market of its own, the development of a strong corps of writers and progress in the realm of the sciences as well as in university programs and research, there is good reason to believe that Quebec has fairly well established its cultural independence.

Here we come to Gérard Tougas's principal assertion. Americans, still marked at the turn of the century with vestiges of a colonial spirit, had little confidence in their culture. Generally speaking, they considered there was but a single English literature on both sides of the Atlantic, their own being at best a vigorous offshoot of the mother tree. Only in the aftermath of the 1914-1918 war did they begin to take into account the relative importance of such authors as Hawthorne, Whitman, Thoreau and Poe, arriving too at the realization that they had, in fact, a distinct personality of their own (*DLQ* 133). For Tougas, this is exactly the stage at which Quebec finds itself today. With Gabrielle Roy announcing the way and Gérard Bessette serving as a sort of Henry James, a constellation of writers has come to the fore, among them principally Hubert Aquin,

Yves Thériault, Marie-Claire Blais, Réjean Ducharme, Jacques Godbout, Michel Tremblay and Jacques Ferron (*DLQ* 94). If we also consider the ambitious enterprise that has been undertaken to recuperate works of the past, a belief in the existence of an autonomous national literature, distinct from its French counterpart, is quite justified, for the literature of Quebec reflects a reality whose contours are as clear today as those of American literature.

What Tougas is saying, therefore, is that there now exists in the francophone world a second French literature, that is to say, one which, like the literature of France itself, is of entirely French expression, but one which differs from it in substance.² Consequently, the author attaches great importance to defining Franco-Quebec relations as clearly as possible.

Whereas Britain, Spain and Portugal have found their culture perpetuated and themselves supplanted by mammoth nations to which they gave birth, such has not been the case for France and her former colonies. Paris has long enjoyed a pre-eminent role in French culture. However, the French are becoming increasingly aware that their civilization is threatened by the ubiquity of Anglo-American influence. Quebec's writers and critics must also realize, for their part, that, although they no longer represent a mere appendage to French letters, France has nonetheless a very special role to play as the cradle of their mutual civilizations. As Haitian authors have already ascertained, fragile relations with the mother culture must be strengthened and maintained. As for Franco-Quebec relations in particular, in the interest of both parties, there must be a good deal of give and take to achieve collaboration, for it is the francophone world community that is at stake (*DLQ* 27).

According to Tougas, one of the principal signs that a literature has reached its moment of full maturity comes when those engaged in its study begin to reexamine works of the past in order to revive the experience they will expose so that it may then be re-created in the future.³ In other words, the traits of the early colonists, unearthed by research, will serve to establish the psychological basis of Quebec literature in the course of its development. In two histories of French Canadian literature written in the 1960s, Tougas discovers the first signs of this process.⁴ Touching on the writings of New France, he himself, in his obsession with the notion of autonomy, is led to the idea of the

specific character of the Québécois, a character that several hundred years of isolation in North America have not fundamentally altered (*DLQ* 179).

As a literary critic commenting on the works of individual authors, Gérard Tougas's assessments are by and large quite penetrating, but in other respects, his assertions are often either contradictory or highly debatable. It seems rather naïve to profess, for example, that before the Conquest, the people of New France lived harmoniously in a sort of terrestrial Eden.⁵ Nor can we accept the view that Hubert Aquin is relatively unknown outside his homeland merely because he has not enjoyed the publicity campaigns and the financial backing given writers like Mailer, for instance.

While one of Tougas's chief aims has been to encourage the precarious cultural existence of the francophone world, his essay serves also as a prophecy of doom (Éthier-Blais 18). He despairingly asserts that intelligence and excellence are being replaced everywhere by what is banal, vulgar and insipid (*DLQ* 142). In France, a classical style with its privileged position as a vehicle of thought (an impersonal polished style evident in the works of Marguerite Yourcenar, for instance, or in Tougas's own writing for that matter), is being slowly eroded by a new conformity (*DLQ* 75). In Britain, too, a traditional prose is being invaded by this new wave, but the suggestion that England has faded to the level of being culturally a mere colony of the United States or that authors such as Graham Greene or Anthony Burgess have been somehow superseded by American writers like John Updike certainly seems exaggerated.⁶ On the contrary, the English seem quite adept at defending their own culture.

While deprecating the influence of American popular culture, our author gives evidence, nonetheless, of a particular sympathy for America.⁷ This is clearly seen in his choice of America's literary evolution to serve as an example in the study of his own literature. On the other hand, his comments on Britain's role on the world's stage are at times disparaging, while, insofar as Canada is concerned, he tends to lay a good deal of stress upon tensions between the French and English Canadian communities, particularly during the 1950s (*DLQ* 166).

Admittedly criticism of Gérard Tougas is not our subject. His personal biases are only of interest here insofar as they impinge upon his literary judgments. They sometimes do so. In his essay there is surprisingly little reference to a literature that should interest him greatly: I mean, of

course, the literature of English-speaking Canada. Yet, one of the few comments he makes on the subject is to suggest the relatively insignificant social status of the Canadian writer in comparison with his Quebec counterpart (*DLQ* 129).

Towards the end of the essay, Tougas offers the opinion that, until a literature has produced a figure who has taken the spheres of international consciousness, then it cannot be said to have taken the ultimate step in its advance towards autonomy. As the author admits, the critics of Quebec, intent on interpreting their own national works, have not been able to attain this level. Evidently, this is so because of the very nature of their cultural situation.⁸ However, as Gérard Tougas himself points out, such a personality does exist in Canada, Northrop Frye, a scholar whose works are universal in scope and who has acquired an international reputation besides (*DLQ* 172).

This reference to Northrop Frye necessitates an important digression. For Frye himself, Canadian literature, in a prolific upsurge since 1960, has become a real literature (not to say an autonomous one) and is recognized as such the world over.⁹ But Frye takes into account the entire Canadian scene, Quebec being in no way excluded. With his theory of the "garrison mentality" Frye proposed the most durable principle yet conceived on the subject of Canadian culture. While this "garrison," that is to say, a "closely knit . . . beleaguered society," has evolved historically for both the French and the English, in English Canada it has mainly meant the stifling effects of a material and mechanical order, whereas, in Quebec, it has meant the longlasting fetters of an ascetic code (Frye 4). What is clear, in any case, in these historic conditions is the fact that there exists for both linguistic realities in Canada a "common cultural predicament" (Jones 4). In other words, this nation has become the economic and cultural colony of the United States, and increasingly so. As minority cultures, Quebec and English Canada continually undergo the immense power of American penetration. In this regard, through linguistic, cultural and economic proximity, there is probably even greater danger of the eventual extinction of English Canadian culture and literature. Yet, for over a hundred years this northern "garrison" has succeeded in maintaining across the breadth of the continent an independent national entity.

In much the same way as Quebec writers have sought a distinctive prose language, a quest for an appropriate literary style may be found as

well among English Canadian authors from the very earliest times. Canadian writers and thinkers, in a continuing effort to preserve a way of life different from that of their southern neighbors, developed not only a separate culture but also a "garrison style." Originally, rather than adopt the vernacular rhythms found in American fiction, they deliberately turned away from this in favor of a style derived from writers of the British tradition, a more formal and sometimes pedantic tone which has since been referred to as the "tory mode." These efforts have led, however, to a sort of "linguistic split personality" (MacLulich 7-20). While writers like Hugh MacLennan and Robertson Davies have striven to maintain a more classical idiom committed to communicating reflective arguments and conservative values, others, such as Morley Callaghan and Mordecai Richler, in an effort to reflect more closely the people they write about, tend more strongly towards colloquial speech. As may be perceived in the works of Margaret Atwood, Robert Kroetsch and others, it appears that this formal style is slowly breaking down in favor of the popular mode in Canada much as in England and France.¹⁰

In any case, as we have suggested, the traditional style was never merely a question of a more educated vocabulary and rigorous syntax, it also implied the defence of certain values. For instance, MacLennan and Davies create cultivated heroes and Frederick Philip Grove and Timothy Findley fairly upright protagonists rather than the coarse-fibered immature types found in the novels of James Jones and Norman Mailer. Davies in particular decries in American fiction "a notion of man as a derelict and irresponsible creature existing in a world where no moral values apply" (343). It appears indeed true that, although it is rapidly evolving, Canadian literature has little affinity with an aimless mediocre hero like John Updike's Rabbit, Salinger's disillusioned Holden Caulfield or the utter violence and amorality of Truman Capote's *Music for Chameleons* (Galloway 140). While the moral concerns of certain of these authors is beyond question, they remain, nevertheless, largely beyond the pale of the Canadian experience.

The fact that the very existence of a distinctive English Canadian cultural experience is a notion that has long been shrouded in doubt, obscurity and controversy is certainly one of the most curious aspects of this country's social and cultural evolution. A very widespread opinion among educated Québécois holds that English Canada is deprived of any culture and Canadian poetry is merely a diluted offshoot of its American

counterpart. The well-known poet and author, Michel Beaulieu, dispelled this contention only after close scrutiny (40). While an interview with Margaret Atwood and his own personal research led him to reject this view, Beaulieu was also amazed to discover a very rich and diversified store of poetic works in English as well as what he deemed to be a Canadian mania for anthologies. Indeed, he is but one more witness to the coming of age of English Canadian writing as well as the contemporary boom in publishing and literary criticism throughout this country.

This commentary has been quite summary, but we now have at hand an appraisal of the relative dimensions of both English Canadian as well as Quebec literature. Armed with this clearer perspective, we can now return to Gérard Tougas and draw some further conclusions concerning *Destin littéraire du Québec*.

In discussing the fortunes of French culture in North America, Tougas points out how, in recent years, the situation has changed dramatically in Canada; it is no longer necessary to visit Quebec in order to appreciate its literature and culture. The University of Toronto, with one of the finest libraries in the world, has a first rate collection of works from French Canada; furthermore, conditions are quite comparable at Tougas's own University of British Columbia and elsewhere throughout the Canadian West (*DLQ* 167). If in order to thrust aside old animosities and disseminate Quebec's culture beyond its borders it is desirable for English Canadian scholars to study the literature of Quebec, Tougas's silence regarding English Canadian writing is rather puzzling. The progress he points to should imply some form of reciprocity. True, there are the francophone fears of further English incursions of English into Quebec culture. However, according to the author's own theory of psychological duality, the Quebec critic is faced with an inescapable double choice: it is imperative for him to be versed not only in French and European but also in American letters. The stress he places on the latter dimension shows that the question of the English language is not really of prime concern: it is not so much a question of language as of cultural power and influence. Moreover, this concept of duality now seems rather suspect since it does not take into consideration the cultural realities of all North America. It ignores a literature that should be of particular interest to Quebec scholars.

Even while refusing any intimation of a privileged situation, Tougas does recognize the very direct contact that exists between Quebec

scholars and their English Canadian colleagues (*DLQ* 127). This being true, since in both range and quality English Canadian writing is quite impressive in comparison with Quebec's own, why would its study not be at least as profitable as the American example proposed as a signpost toward emancipation? (*DLQ* 11). Since, as Gérard Tougas himself asserts, Quebec has attained its complete cultural independence and should thus feel strengthened in its sense of a strong separate identity, such contacts might enhance a mutual dynamism. From a knowledge of the literature of English Canada, Quebec students could derive support for the preservation their own heritage; they might find English Canadian literature significant and enriching as well as an expression of the culture of some twenty million citizens of the rest of Canada. I am not however confident that this will come about. Tougas's attitudes manifest some of the underlying causes of the social and linguistic conflicts as well as of the political crisis now facing this country.

In Quebec today, the views of a writer like Clément Moisan are, therefore, rather exceptional. He adds striking support to my attitude to the question of cultural relations. In a first essay devoted to the literatures of Quebec and of English Canada, this specialist in the field professes to have established their basic interrelationship (*L'Age* 13). According to Moisan, because of the common history and parallel evolution of the two founding peoples, the comparative study of their literatures would necessarily lead to the revelation of dynamic forces that the world will some day be compelled to recognize. This study should also help to answer a "burning question": if both the Quebec and Canadian peoples are meant to survive, what exactly are they to survive to do? (*Poésie* 174).

In his dreams of cultural expansion, Tougas affirms, as would other Québécois intellectuals, that only through greater communication within the francophone world can Quebec hope to escape the yoke of its isolation (*DLQ* 176). But is such a contention correct? Could not this be better achieved closer to home? Doesn't Quebec risk becoming even more isolated by aiming only at closer links with French-speaking nations, and failing to establish reciprocal relations with other cultures?

Along with Moisan, another comparatist, Ronald Sutherland, pushes his *rapprochement* of Quebec and English Canadian literature even further, discovering numerous points of resemblance. We can add to the work of Moisan and Sutherland the scholarship of other specialists in

Canadian studies, Margot Northey, Philip Stratford and Douglas Jones, for instance. All have explored particular themes, images and attitudes of mind singled out by virtue of their recurrence in a wide variety of authors, both French and English Canadian, over a period of several generations. However, another critic, E. D. Blodgett, expresses grave reservations concerning both the methods and approach used in comparative Canadian literature and sees in this field of study a confusion of cultural and political goals and an effort to forge a unity in a country where mutual distinctiveness is preferable (*Configuration* 24). Nevertheless, despite these assertions, many of the comparatists' findings remain quite sound.

Besides the authors we have mentioned, the appearance in 1972 of Margaret Atwood's *Survival*, a thematic guide to Canadian literature with a special chapter on Quebec writers, has also shed a good deal of light on the characteristics of Canadians at large and their cultural behavior. Atwood's poetic work, *The Journals of Suzanna Moodie* should also be mentioned. In a way similar to the research carried out by Quebec scholars into life in New France, Atwood has probed the character of Ontario's early settlers in an effort to uncover the fundamental traits of the Canadian psyche.

All of this leads us back to Tougas and to the conclusions of *Destin littéraire du Québec*. For his part, he asserts that, henceforth in our time, Quebec literature reflects a reality that can be quite readily defined. However, since it is a literature which is still in gestation, the contours of its mythology (i.e. its mythical and imaginative qualities) remain quite vague. With the turn of the century, the time will come when it may be judged in better perspective, when its basic structure will have been consolidated and the historic documents on New France will have been scrutinized. Only then will it be possible to indicate the fundamental characteristics of this literature and the people it reflects (*DLQ* 144).

Even if this is true, I would nevertheless contend, with the critics already mentioned, that certain contours of the literatures of both Quebec and English Canada have already been clearly discerned. Furthermore, as comparatists have shown, an examination of the literary creations representative of both cultures gives evidence of such similarities that Tougas's theory of the "specificity" of the Quebec people can also be seriously questioned.

In line with certain nationalist theories, Tougas supports the idea that humans do not fundamentally change with the passing of time under the conditions of a new environment; they maintain their unique character mainly as a result of the deep-rooted effects of language and religion (*DLQ* 179). However, as I have argued, the human temperament seems to be more malleable than this. Several hundred years of mutual experience in North America with its severe climate and vast landscape, as well as through other sources of common influence—social, economic, technological, political and so forth—have given the Québécois a significantly greater kinship with their English-speaking compatriots than is often believed.

NOTES

1. "La littérature québécoise se réfère à une réalité dont les contours sont désormais aussi nets que ceux de la littérature américaine" (154). This concept of an autonomous Quebec culture and literature is not new under Tougas's pen; it appears along with the idea of the essential latinity of the Quebec people in his *Histoire de la littérature canadienne française* (Paris: P.U.F., 1969). Another work, *La francophonie en péril* (Montréal: Cercle du livre France, 1967), deals with the precarious state of the French language in today's world.
2. "Il existe désormais une deuxième littérature de langue française, *la littérature québécoise*. Les littératures francophones sont celles qui sont naissantes et qui sans la France risqueraient de s'étioler. La littérature québécoise pourrait, à la rigueur, se passer de la France" (63).
3. "Ce qui nous intéresse ici, c'est de pouvoir mettre le doigt sur le moment précis de la psychologie nationale quand, d'un commun élan, on se penche sur ce passé déjà inventorié avec l'intention de le réinventer" (134).
4. *Histoire de la littérature française du Québec* (1967) dirigée par Pierre de Grandpré and *Histoire de la littérature canadienne française* (1968) coordonnée par Gérard Bessette, Lucien Geslin et Charles Parent.
5. "Un Eden, un pays qui s'appartenait et dont l'épanouissement n'était entravé par aucune présence étrangère" (181).
6. Any viewer of the PBS television network knows only too well how educated Americans appear to heavily favor British cinema, theatre, comedy, and so on. The influence is not all in the other direction then as Tougas suggests and it seems, furthermore, that in accordance with Northrop Frye's principle, cultural "interpenetration" is, as usual, handily at work. See Frye 24.
7. See Tougas's other volume, *Puissance littéraire des États-Unis*.

8. "Le critique québécois . . . qui n'est connu que pour ses interprétations de la littérature nationale ne peut, logiquement, atteindre à la notoriété internationale" (173).
9. "Canadian literature since 1960 has become a real literature" (Frye 30).
10. That Gérard Tougas is conscious of the existence of this style is visible in his reference to Kenneth Galbraith who, originally from Ontario, brought a great refinement to his economic analyses in the United States; however, for Tougas, writers like Galbraith are bound to disappear (130).

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