

Brawling with Gerard Bessette

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PERHAPS the best word to describe the 25-year career of distinguished French-Canadian writer Gérard Bessette is versatility — versatility of theme, of style, of technique, of genre and of subject matter. He began with analyses of novels and poetry, then published a collection of his own poems in 1954. His *Les Images en poésie canadienne-française* and *Une littérature en ébullition* are widely regarded as contemporary classics of literary criticism, and his *Anthologie d'Albert Laberge* is no doubt responsible for the rediscovery and revival of interest in Laberge, that strange haunted newspaper sports columnist who published his naturalistic fiction privately and who is the real precursor of such current novelists as Marie-Claire Blais, Réjean Ducharme and Roch Carrier. Bessette has also written a large body of fiction himself, including five remarkably different novels, two of which, *Le libraire* and *L'incubation* were rendered in English by the translator Glen Shortliffe under the titles *Not for Every Eye* and *Incubation*.

To my mind, however, Bessette's most intriguing book is still his first novel *La Bagarre* (The Brawl), which was published in 1958 and has not yet been translated.¹ In a number of respects this novel foreshadows the major problems and themes which will occupy Quebec society and Quebec authors of the sixties and since. It is almost uncannily prophetic with regard to labor problems, religion, language, education and sex, making it even more relevant today, and considerably more meaningful perhaps, than it was when it appeared 15 years ago. *La Bagarre* is set in Montreal, in nightclubs around the center of the city, in the

streets of the East End and in the old metropolitan tramway car barns at Iberville and Ste. Catherine streets. It concerns a few weeks in the life of Jules Lebeuf, a big, husky 29-year-old man who is working at night as a sweeper in the tramway barns to pay for a belated university education. Lebeuf, whose vague ambition is to become a writer, thus operates in two distinct social circles. He spends a good deal of time drinking in bars with his university friends, Ken Weston, an American ex-GI who is trying to write a thesis on French Canadians, and Augustin Sillery, the sometimes brilliant, spoiled homosexual son of a well-heeled businessman and his refined, aristocratic wife. Lebeuf's mistress, Marguerite, a waitress, and his fellow workers at the tramway barns, on the other hand, are from the lowest level of Quebec's working class. Then there is Gisèle, the pretty, talented daughter of sweeper Philippe "Bill" (unrelated nicknames are often enough used in Quebec) Lafrenière; she has ambitions, and Lebeuf is asked to help her. With such a gallery of characters, Bessette is able to probe the anxieties of individuals in a society at what Lebeuf calls "une croisée de chemins" — a crossroads.

And a crossroads it is indeed. Bessette's purpose in *La Bagarre* is to dramatize the upheaval resulting when a long-suppressed, static, conservative group of people, mainly rural-orientated, suddenly find themselves in the frantic, cosmopolitan, rapidly changing North-American urban context. For centuries in Quebec, the roles which individuals would follow in life were established and well defined. In a society where the Old Order is disintegrating, the roles have become indefinite and confused. Sillery, from the social class of the former *collège-classique* - educated elite of Québec, has difficulty understanding how Lebeuf can be a student in arts and yet sweep out tram cars for a living. Lebeuf's fellow workers are mystified by the phenomenon of a sweeper attending courses at l'Université de Montréal. Nobody, including Lebeuf, is adjusted to the new mobility and freedom. In fact, freedom and how various individuals

react to it, is essentially what Gérard Bessette's *La Bagarre* is about.

The various forces which acted in concert to suppress individual liberty in Quebec society — the Church, the caste system, ingrained attitudes towards sex and education, labor management relations — all of these are shown by Bessette at a stage of weakening or modification. The protagonist, Jules Lebeuf, is an example of the "liberated" individual. He has travelled and worked in the United States, but he has come home to realize his ambitions. He lives with Marguerite without benefit of clergy. He also goes back to school, where the only person in his age group turns out to be the American, Weston. He takes Gisèle to a psychologist for an aptitude test, and when it is established that she has exceptional talent for mathematics, he advises her to take a part-time job and study at Sir George Williams College, despite the pressures on her either to go to work in a factory or to follow an unsuitable classical course at a convent.

Among his fellow workers at the tramway barns, Lebeuf is the leader. Bessette paints a fascinating group portrait of the other workers, old Onésime Boulé who is called Bouboule, Bill, Charlot the Italian, the fat Marceau, le père Breton, and the person hated by them all, Lévêque the foreman. The men constantly curse the company — "ces maudits écoeurants d'enfants-de-chienne-là" — in general and, because he is immediately available, Lévêque in particular. They talk of striking, but in fact, as Bessette subtly dramatizes, they are helpless. They do not know what to do. They fear authority. They have been conditioned, as their fathers and grandfathers before them were, to accept misery as their lot. When old Bouboule finally erupts, he foolishly and ineffectually hits the foreman Lévêque on the head with a broom. As a result, he loses his job and his pension is cancelled, after 30 years of service!

It is Lebeuf who intercedes for Bouboule, the other men again proving themselves incapable of positive action. And

it is only by accepting to replace Lévêque as foreman, thus divorcing himself from his old co-workers, that Lebeuf is able to get the company to reinstate Bouboule, who then becomes a model employee. The company, then, wins the first round by a unanimous decision. The threat, the potential trouble-maker, is shifted from one side of the fence to the other. But as Bessette intimates, the real problem with regard to the exploitation of labor in Quebec is not so much the attitude of management (bosses will bend when they have to); rather it is the ingrained subservience of the workers ("ces mines de chiens battus"). What is of greater significance, however, is that leaders who have shaken off this inferiority complex are emerging. There are the Lebeufs, and not all of them will be lifted over the fence. The situation is ripe for an explosion. In fact, Bessette accurately predicts the massive unrest and resulting conflicts which will hit Quebec labor relations in the years following the publication of *La Bagarre*. And he provides a perceptive analysis of the whole spectrum of attitudes — servile acceptance, fear, dissatisfaction, indirection, blind defiance, futile violence, recrimination and reasoned determination — which continue to characterize the phenomenon. One need look no further than *La Bagarre* to understand why management-labor relations in Quebec have followed such a rocky road.

Bessette's novel also heralds the collapse of the influence of the Church in Quebec. For most of the characters, including Marguerite, Augustin and Lebeuf, religion is no longer a consideration at all. Marguerite, to be sure, makes a vestigial concession to the Old Order when she buys an "alliance" (a wedding ring) before visiting the doctor for a pregnancy check, but it is obviously in the interests of convenience rather than morality. Bill's reason for consulting Lebeuf about Gisèle's future is that he doesn't trust the local priests; — "ils voudraient qu'elle fasse une soeur" — they want to make a nun out of her, he says. As it turns out, Bill trusts "les maudzits Anglais" even less. When

Lebeuf suggests that Gisèle pursue her studies at an English-speaking college, he hesitates, and Gisèle ends up at a convent after all. But it is Bill's fear of the "English" rather than his allegiance to the Church which conditions his decision, or indecision. In Quebec novels before *La Bagarre*, the Church is regarded in two general ways: earlier works by such authors as Conan, Gérin-Lajoie, Grignon, Hémon or Ringuet show it dominating the lives of all and never being seriously questioned; it is an accepted fact of life. Beginning with Albert Laberge and Jean-Charles Harvey and moving on to Langevin, Simard, Roy and Marcotte, we see a fierce struggle between Church values and the individual's personal sense of ethics. *La Bagarre* stands at the crossroads. In it there is no struggle against the Church; more often than not, the Church as a life-molding force is simply not there. Which, of course, is the shape of things to come in the recent works of such writers as Godbout, Aquin, Poulin, Renaud and a number of others.

What Bessette captures in *La Bagarre*, then, is Quebec at the crucial period of transformation from a static society to a dynamic society. Traditional attitudes are lingering on, but it is clear that they are of rapidly fading importance in the minds of the people. The major problem is that the people do not know what to do with their newly acquired freedom. It has come about too quickly. The workers at the tramway barns do not go much further than mumbling vague threats about strike action. Though her parents want a life better than their own for Gisèle, they are afraid to stray too far from the familiar pattern. Gisèle herself is unsure. Marguerite is willing to "live in sin" with Lebeuf, but secretly she yearns for the supposed security of marriage and a small motel near the American border which she and Jules can operate together. Finally, Lebeuf himself proves incapable of resolving his own life. He wants to be a writer, but he constantly finds excuses not to write, because he is afraid that he will fail. He wants a university degree, yet he quits when only a few

weeks' work would earn him one. He wants to remain a worker with the other workers, but he accepts the job of foreman. At the climax of the book, because he does not like the idea of the 16-year-old Gisèle in a nightclub with Augustin Sillery, he precipitates a senseless brawl, fighting clients and waiters and being saved from a beer-bottle blow on the head by his friend Weston. Lebeuf thus becomes the symbol of a society in transition, of the indirection resulting from the disappearance of old values and patterns of living, and of the potential for a particular kind of violent eruption in Quebec. He is a complex, confused character, just as Quebec in the current period of transition is complex and confused. It is no wonder then that Weston, the American who has come to write a thesis on French Canadians, finally decides that the task is impossible and goes home to a newspaper job in Saint Louis.

In addition to its thematic significance, *La Bagarre* is distinguished by other qualities. Characterization, both major and minor, is executed with skill and sensitivity. Of particular note is Augustin Sillery, possibly the first complete and convincing portrait of a homosexual in Canadian literature. Sillery is refined and well informed, a man of exquisite taste in certain respects, and he is able to parlay these qualities into acceptance by the intellectual group within which he moves. In fact, he parades his effeminacy, delicately raising his cigarette holder, exaggerating his gestures, calling everyone "mon cher," frequently alluding to homosexuality in one way or another. When Lebeuf does the same satirically, Sillery comes right back with a remark about the latter's non-existent writings — "Si jamais tu daignais soumettre à mes yeux fascinés quelques lignes de ta plume, je me prosternerai front contre terre et admirerais en silence." — and usually that is enough to silence the big man.

Sillery's relationship with his mother and father is carefully outlined by Bessette. The father is a hard-headed businessman who does not know what to make of his only

son. Consequently there is little communication between the two. Augustin's mother, on the other hand, dotes on him. She waits up until all hours for him to come home, and to the exclusion of the father, she has constructed her life around his comings and goings. She knows that he is homosexual, yet she keeps hoping that he will become interested in the right girl. On the other hand, it is clear that she would not want to lose her son to another woman. Whether or not it is the cause of his homosexuality, Augustin's relationship with his mother has obviously not militated against it.

The intensity of Augustin's emotions, especially with regard to a young student called Langevin, is impressed repeatedly on the reader. Especially effective is the scene where Augustin, infuriated by Langevin's failure to show up for a rendez-vous, tries to pick up a youth at a bowling alley. The youth is with another couple, and Sillery seems particularly repulsed by the girl — "un animal à reproduction." But when the girl bends over in her tight skirt, displaying the shape of her ample buttocks, he thinks to himself, "Dire qu'il existe des hommes pour trouver ça provocant! Sillery les enviait." He envies the men who can react normally to women. In other words, despite his appearance of arrogant confidence, Sillery has deep feelings of guilt. Quebec society has not yet changed sufficiently for it to be otherwise, and Augustin has a tormented existence. Like Weston, he finally decides to leave Quebec. Bessette succeeds in presenting the complexities of Augustin's personality so that the reader's sympathies are engaged — altogether an adroit and convincing piece of characterization.

Bessette's technique of characterization relies heavily on dialogue. There are a number of revealing and entertaining interchanges between Lebeuf and Marguerite, or among Weston, Sillery and Lebeuf. In *La Bagarre* the most striking aspect of Bessette's style is his handling of spoken language, whether the "joul" of the tramway "sweepers,"

the schoolgirl French of Gisèle, the not-completely learned variety of Weston, or the affected diction of Augustin Sillery. Here, for instance, is the latter talking to Lebeuf and Weston:

"Rien, messieurs, ne me réchaufferait davantage le coeur que de poursuivre jusqu'à l'aurore aux doigts de rose ces palabres marécageuses, mais des devoirs impérieux me requièrent en d'autres lieux . . ." (p. 58)

Or startling young Gisèle, when Lebeuf brings her to meet him, with:

"O couple idyllique, issu pour mon délice des ténèbres extérieures — ô couple, prends un siège, c'est moi qui t'en convie." (p. 103).

Compare Sillery's language with that of the sweepers:

"Watch out, les boys. Je vois le fanal de Lévêque. Il s'en vient de ce côté-icitte. On est mieux de scammer." (p. 49)²

"R'marque ben c'qe j'te dzis, Bill: si ça continue, ils vont les emplir de marde, nos chârs, pis ils vont nous faire nettoyer ça avec not'e langue. Du goudron, ça entre dans l'bois, ça enfonce creux, t'a pas d'idée, serpent! Pis v'là-t-y pas que c'maudit râleux de liche-cul de Lévêque, v'là-t-y pas qu'il vient me dire que c'est pas assez net!" (pp. 44-45)³

Strangely enough, Gérard Bessette, who has proven himself so adept at handling many levels of language, considers, or at least used to consider, the linguistic problem to be the biggest obstacle facing French-Canadian writers. In a commentary on the Quebec novel, he remarks on the success of the Americans in establishing their own brand of English. Then he goes on to say:

Jouirons-nous jamais, nous romanciers canadiens-français, de la même indépendance, du même sentiment de force linguistiques? — Il me semble que non. Que nous frauderait-il en effet? — Rien de moins qu'une population, qu'une influence politique, culturelle et militaire comparables à celles de la France. (C'est le cas des Etats-Unis vis-à-vis de l'Angleterre.) Jusque-là, nous ne pouvons pas (nous ne pouvons pas même souhaiter) laisser évoluer notre langue "naturellement." Car ce serait vouloir remplacer une langue "universelle" par un dialecte.⁴

This statement was made some ten years ago, and it is possible that Bessette has now become more optimistic with regard to the possibility of Quebec French gaining respectability and legitimacy as a vehicle for literary expression. Certainly in the last ten years or so a number of writers have been moving steadily in that direction. With regard to both the art of writing and the use of the language of French Canada, there is now a great deal more self-assurance and confidence. When he wrote *La Bagarre*, Gérard Bessette stood with a small number of others at the forefront of the new literary sensibility of Quebec. That sensibility is now firmly established, as the variety, quality and fertility of contemporary writing attest, and Bessette's work in all of its versatile aspects must be regarded as a large and important contributing factor.

NOTES

- ¹Gérard Bessette, *La Bagarre* (Montreal: Le Cercle du livre de France, 1958). Subsequent references in this edition appear in my text.
- ²Watch out, boys. I see Lévêque's lamp. He's coming over this way. We better beat it.
- ³Listen to what I tell yuh, Bill; if it keeps up, the next thing yuh know they'll be fillin 'em fulla shit, our cars, then they'll make us clean 'em with our tongues. That tar, it gets right down into the wood, it works itself in deep, goddamit. Then don't yuh have that goddam nagging, arse-kissing Lévêque on yer back, don't I have 'im tellin' me that it ain't clean enough!
- ⁴In *Le Roman canadien-français*, Archives des lettres canadiennes, III (Montreal: Fides, 1964), pp. 338-39.