

LOUIS LASNIER

Gérard Bessette
1920-2005



Born on a farm near Sainte-Anne-de-Sabrevois, Quebec, he spent his early childhood in the village of Saint-Alexandre before moving to Montreal in 1930. He was educated at the Sainte-Croix day school, the École Normale Jacques-Cartier, and the Université de Montréal, obtaining a master's degree in 1946 and a doctorate in 1950. He taught at the University of Saskatchewan (1946–9), Duquesne University, Pittsburgh (1951–8), the Collège Militaire Royale, Kingston (1958–60), and Queen's University (1960–79). In 1979 he began to devote his time entirely to writing. He has contributed to various periodicals and received several awards: the Prix du Concours Littéraire from the Province of Quebec in 1947; two Governor General's Awards; and the Prix David in 1980. He became a member of the Royal Society of Canada in 1966.

Bessette began his career as a creative writer with the publication of *Poèmes temporels* (1954) and as a literary critic with *Les images en poésie canadienne-française* (1960). Later psychocritical studies—of Émile Nelligan, Anne Hébert, Yves Thériault, and Gabrielle Roy in *Une littérature en ébullition* (1968), of Victor-Lévy Beaulieu, André Langevin, and Roy in *Trois romanciers québécois* (1973)—reveal a psychoanalytical approach to the study of literature that is Freudian in nature. Bessette also compiled anthologies: *Anthologie d'Albert Laberge* (1962), which helped to introduce Quebec's first naturalist writer (q.v.); *De Québec à Saint-Boniface (récits et nouvelles du Canada-français)* (1968); and *Histoire de la littérature canadienne-française* (1968) in collaboration with Lucien Geslin and Charles Parent.

During his father's fatal illness (1957–9) Bessette turned to novel-writing. *La bagarre* (1958) and *Les pédagogues* (1961) are realistic and traditional, his narrators objective and omniscient. *La bagarre* examines three aspects of French Canada and describes the problems that confront students—three types of student, three failures. Jules Lebeuf, who hopes to become a writer and goes out with a waitress who hardly interests him, eventually opts for trade-unionism; Sillery, a homosexual, chooses exile and the study of anthropology and colonialism; the American Weston plans the study of French Canadians for his thesis but abandons his project in favour of journalism. *La bagarre* was translated by Mark Lebel as *The brawl* (1976). *Les pédagogues* satirizes the narrow-minded atmosphere in a school whose director is a doctrinaire conformist; Sarto Pellerin can neither change his environment nor prevent the abuse inflicted by the clerical authorities. His failure is echoed in *Le libraire* (1960), a witty satire on book censorship in the Duplessis era. Hervé Jodoin, after losing his job as college proctor, becomes a cynical, depressed country librarian, but once again breaks the rules and loses his job for having sold a censored book to a student. This novel, which attacks the hypocrisy of a situation that could be saved only by a 'quiet revolution', was translated by Glen Shortliffe as *Not for every eye* (1962). *Le libraire* prepared the ground for *L'Incubation* (1965), in which the student-professor-bookseller of the first novels is a repressed librarian no longer belligerent but dismayed by the disintegration he sees in human relationships. The narrative, related by the librarian, takes the form of a long, unpunctuated stream of ideas and emotions. It won a Governor General's Award and was translated as *Incubation* (1967) by Shortliffe.

La commensale (1975), which was written before *L'incubation* but not published until much later, pursues further the type of satire found in *La bagarre* and *Le libraire*. Directed at urban small businesses, it portrays harshly and ironically the manias of the autistic protagonist, Chayer, an accountant or bookkeeper—a product of the repressive Duplessis era, like Jodoin the bookseller—who decides to oppose his boss. Formerly timid and compliant, these men come to

life in a spirit of revolt—becoming devious, calculating, and sly—just as the Quiet Revolution dawns.

In 1954, in ‘Les douze meilleurs romans français du xix^e siècle’ (*Nouvelle Revue canadienne*, iii), Bessette revealed his principles as a novelist: the supremacy of persons; physical surroundings presented in human terms; believable characters; the development of passions outlined; individual feelings analysed; the interactions between social behaviour and inner response described; and the avoidance of bombast and excess. He seemed to dread the ‘novel of the unconscious’, the ‘apparent break with tradition’, the ‘preference for the abnormal, the strange, the unconscious’, and the ‘contempt for established critical methods, disparaged since the rise of Surrealism’. After Bessette wrote *La commensale*, however, his writing underwent a profound change: as he persisted with the introspective novel, while also trying to incorporate his understanding of psychology, his work evolved from a positivist rationalism into an exploration of the unconscious. He eliminated conventional punctuation, the better to convey a stream of consciousness, and invented new words, including composites made up of unexpected, vivid juxtapositions of nouns, adjectives, and verbs. To the simple parentheses and hyphens that replaced normal punctuation in *L'incubation*, Bessette added double parentheses in *Le cycle* (1971) to indicate the emergence of a character's unconsciousness; dashes frame physical observations and sensations; and single parentheses surround hallucinations of the preconscious. In *Le cycle* three generations of the same family—seven members presented through seven interior monologues—are reunited by the death of their relative, which offers an occasion for them to consider his life and ruminate on their own problems and ruling passions. *Le cycle* won a Governor General's Award.

Les anthropoides (1977) conducts the reader to the source of the interior monologue: to the birth of consciousness and speech, and to the beginnings of the individual and the species. A novel of origins, it is both an epic and a personal myth, and concerns the solitude of a young ‘speaker’—an ancestor and son of heroes who is preparing for his test: to tell the history of the primitive horde. The book ends with a great battle among various opposing hordes, one horde winning with the help of another.

Le semestre (1979), an autobiographical novel, is about a university professor, Omer Marin, on the verge of retirement. He reflects on his youth, his career, his loves, his adventures with a young female student (much as Bernard Malamud does in *A new life*), and analyses the work of another author, Gilbert La Rocque. A novel-essay, *Le semestre* is similar to *Mes romans et moi* (1979), in the first half of which Bessette recounts the first ten years of his life and in the second half analyses his novels. Both *Le semestre* and Bessette's second novel, *Les pédagogues*, have academic settings and criticize the educational system, the first dealing with a professor who looks forward to the end of his teaching life and the second with the failure of a young teacher at the start of his career. Bessette returned to Marin in the novel *Les dires d'Omer Marin* (1985).

La garden-party de Christophine (1980), a collection of all Bessette's short stories, belongs to his ‘assessment’ period. One of these stories, ‘Romance’, is of particular interest for its subject matter and style; it uses a concise, biblical verse form and violent imagery in evoking the agony of an unemployed man who commits suicide after assessing his miserable life.

With their disregard for conventional punctuation, Bessette's narratives present different variations on the interior monologue—exploring the many levels of the unconscious, and the link between the world of the emotions and the world of the senses. Together the novels compose a uniform picture of heroes who are in some way enclosed or trapped by circumstances—they observe, reflect, and question themselves from behind counters, desks, and windows, or within streetcars, automobiles, cubicles, caves, or labyrinthine basements. They struggle to break the barriers that surround them and escape to find their place in the outside world.

Bessette's novels show not only the Québécois 'choirboy' in the process of becoming a Freudian, but that the ego can emerge in spite of a condition of orphanhood—the orphanhood of liberation. Bessette made a major contribution to the exploration of the inner life of Québécois.

Louis Lasnier
Poèmes temporels, Les images en poésie canadienne-française
Une littérature en ébullition

(Author's title given as of the time of writing)