

Gérard Bessette (1920-2005): a *monstre sacré*
in French Canadian literature

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In March 2000, well-known Quebec literary critic Jacques Allard published an article titled “Gérard Bessette, le grand oublié” ‘Gérard Bessette, largely forgotten’ in Montreal’s *Le Devoir* newspaper. In this article, Allard laments the fact that award winning Quebec author, Bessette is no longer really read or studied and invites readers to re-discover his works. He does so by describing Bessette’s contribution, both as a professor and critic, to Quebec’s literary sovereignty and goes on to call him one of the literary masters of the modern French Canadian novel. Although certain active critics such as Annette Hayward and Louis Lasnier, among others, still consider Bessette a major Quebec author, he has not received the same recognition as many of his contemporaries, such as Anne Hébert, Jacques Ferron or Réjean Ducharme. The fact that the majority of his novels, apart from the celebrated *Le Libraire* ‘the bookseller’—translated as *Not for Every Eye*—and two others are no longer in print, bears witness to his marginalization as do brief comments about him or his omission in certain contemporary critical works and Quebec literary anthologies.¹ In truth, Bessette seems to have been somewhat alienated throughout his career if we take into account the title of Ivanhoé Beaulieu’s 1971 newspaper interview “Doit-on encore parler de Gérard Bessette?” ‘Should we still be talking about Gérard Bessette?’ Despite the publication that same year of *Le Cycle*, which gave Bessette his second Governor General’s Literary Award after *L’Incubation* (1965), Beaulieu asks:

Doit-on encore parler de Gérard Bessette? La question vaudrait d’être posée autrement: pourquoi parle-t-on si peu de Gérard

Bessette? Est-ce à cause de la discrétion dont l'homme lui-même sentoure? Ou à cause de son œuvre de romancier? Ou alors à cause de son 'exil' à Kingston. Sans doute un peu pour toutes ces raisons à la fois. (53-54, original emphasis)

Should we still be talking about Gérard Bessette? The question is worth asking in another way: why do we speak so little about Gérard Bessette? Is it because of the discretion with which the author surrounds himself? Or because of his literary works? Or because of his "exil" in Kingston [Ontario]? Without a doubt, a little bit for all these reasons at the same time. (my trans.)²

The answer to this question is complicated as Beaulieu, Allard and others critics such Réjean Robidoux and Francois Paré have suggested and involves the politics of literary alliances and institutions. Both Robidoux and Paré have addressed this issue in the context of Franco-Ontarian literature, which to a certain extent, has recuperated Bessette, given that he spent the majority of his life living outside of Quebec and then chose to remain in Kingston after his retirement from Queen's University where he taught between 1960 and 1979.³

This being said, however, one cannot help but think that the subversive nature of Bessette's literary works has also contributed, at least in part, to his institutional and societal alienation. Having grown up during "La Grande Noirceur," 'The Great Darkness' reputed for its religious, socio-cultural and political conservatism, Bessette endured the Catholic Church's hegemony firsthand in his youth.⁴ His subsequent rebellion against its influence in Quebec was also no doubt fueled by the fact that he was denied a position promised to him at the University of Montreal due to his agnosticism.⁵ Whether it be through criticisms of his native province, sexually charged scenes, animalesque descriptions of characters, his penchant for psychoanalysis, caricaturing his contemporaries or difficult, convoluted narratives, Bessette has never shied away from challenging the status quo. In fact, his best-known novel, *Le Libraire* (1960) had to be first published in France due to Quebec's censorship at the time, a topic which the novel ironically satirizes.⁶

Although *Le Libraire*, interpreted as *Le Libre air* 'free air', *La Libre aire* 'free area' and *La Libre ère* 'free era' by Ben Shek (133), is

certainly representative of Bessette's heterodoxical position within Quebec's literary history, so too is his first novel *La Bagarre* (1958) *The Brawl* (1976).⁷ This novel is of particular interest with respect to deviations of a monstrous nature since it contains many aesthetically monstrous and ideologically deviant elements that Bessette subsequently developed in later novels, most notably in *Le Semestre* 'The Semester' (1980).⁸ In other words, by examining these aspects-in-the-making within *La Bagarre* in comparison to later novels, one better understands the deconstructive nature of Bessette's literary position, which can be explained using Jean Cocteau's epithet *un monstre sacré*, 'a sacred monster' as the verb *sacrer* in French means both to "consecrate" and to "blaspheme."

In effect, it seems appropriate to re-examine *La Bagarre* today in what Jeffrey Cohen calls "a time of monsters" (vii), an idea confirmed by the plethora of recent studies on monsters which reflect society's tendency to be at once increasingly open, tolerant and heterogeneous, yet still conflict-ridden.⁹ Defined as a physical or behavioral deformation that shocks prevailing cultural norms, the monster has come to symbolize transgression and question traditional taxonomies without abandoning its typically eerie, frightening, and phantasmagorical persona. This polymorphous form and polysemic meaning characterize Bessette's monstrosity, the likes of which relativizes fixed ideas by exposing the importance of perspective with respect to judgments as well as the innumerable shapes, sizes and behaviors associated with normalcy. As the title suggests, *La Bagarre* is about a struggle, one that pits society's preconceived ideas about life, sexuality, identity and difference in Quebec at the time against the author's avant-garde interpretation of these socio-cultural assumptions, which subsequently prepare the province's Quiet Revolution.¹⁰

Monstrous Montreal

Set in Montreal, *La Bagarre* is a realistic novel due to its story line and its representation of the city's streets and landmarks. However, Quebec's largest city is not a flattering backdrop for the trials and tribulations of Jules Lebeuf, student by day and tramway cleaner by night. In this story in which Lebeuf gives up his literary aspirations to become a foreman at the Montreal Tramway Company and

help his fellow disgruntled workers have a fired laborer reinstated, Montreal is portrayed as a somewhat monstrous place. Although subtle at first, Lebeuf's initial description of the city illustrates Bessette's tendency to emphasize the primitive, uncivilized and phantasmagorical aspects of the world so as to deconstruct idyllic views of Quebec and society in general. Opening with an overview of Montreal in order to make it *revivre* 'live again' and "lui donner une âme" (39) 'give it a soul of some kind' (31), Lebeuf's attempt to christen the city so to speak does not render it more civilized, but ironically less so. Veiled in darkness, the city is described as if it were a sort of prehistoric sleeping giant.

Puissamment arquée vers le centre par un ancien volcan, l'île fendait le fleuve gigantesque comme une étrave de bateau. C'était la nuit. La ville dormait. ... Quelques centaines de pieds plus bas, des trainées de lumières ... comme des points de couture, suivaient le tracé des grandes artères. ... d'autres lumières formaient d'irrégulières constellations. Mais la plupart des édifices étaient obscurs, ne révélant leur présence que par des bossellements d'ombre. (136-37)

Strongly arched toward the middle by an ancient volcano, the island split the gigantic river like the stem of a vessel. It was night. The city lay sleeping. ... A few hundred feet down, streaks of light, serried and regular as hemming stitches flowed along the beds of the main arteries. ... Strewn all over town, other lights formed dispersed constellations. But most buildings were dark, their presence revealed only through mottled shadows. (99-100)

This representation, despite being rejected by Lebeuf who calls it "[d]u romantisme de la plus banale espèce" (138), '[r]omanticism of the most trite kind' (101) is important as it reflects Bessette's desire to not romanticize the world, but rather expose the soul of the city, that is to say, the unseen, unspoken and menacing aspects of it. Although implicit, Bessette subverts the symbolic value of baptism here through his gothic-like description of Montreal which is also uncanny in that it "ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light" (Freud 225).¹¹ This tendency to underline the eerie, threatening, and yet familiar nature of the setting culminates

in Bessette's seventh novel *Les Anthropoïdes* 'The Anthropoids,' in which he describes the adventures of prehistoric ape-men. In this story, the ancestors of Mankind struggle against what they perceive as a personified land of monstrous deserts, mountains, and a serpent-like river ironically called "Kébékouâ" (295). For example, the volcano/mountain, which is reminiscent of Mont Royal in Lebeuf's panorama, is described in terms of a devouring, bestial place: "le monstre était peut-être mort ou peut-être attendait-il son heure pour réclamer sa ration de chair à coups d'éruptions cataclysmiques" (276) 'the monster was perhaps dead or perhaps he was waiting for his moment to reclaim his ration of flesh by means of cataclysmic eruptions.'

In *La Bagarre*, Montreal is further described by means of Lebeuf's outings with his friends Augustin Sillery and Ken Weston who together haunt the city's bars, cabarets and brothels until the wee hours of the morning. By doing so, Bessette highlights the seedier, deviant side of Montreal and depicts it as a labyrinth of sorts. Sillery, an antagonistic, homosexual character, revels for example in the "interstices mystérieux" (84) 'mysterious slots' (62) during his nocturnal wanderings in what he calls the "plis sinueux de notre capitale" (90) 'winding recesses of our metropolis' (67). He further emphasizes the corruptive nature of the city by citing passages from Baudelaire's *Fleurs du mal*, *Flowers of Evil*, in commentaries on his adventures. For example, he says that he takes delight in "odeurs capiteuses du ventre de Montréal, à l'heure où l'essaim des rêves mal-faisants tord sur leurs oreillers les bruns adolescents" (105) "lush smells of Montreal's belly. 'Time when the swarming mischievous dreams have the tawny adolescents toss in their beds...'" (77).

Portraying the city as a personified beast that devours to a certain extent its inhabitants, Sillery highlights the "Beauty of Evil" and the abnormal hours of his outings. Bessette further develops the mythological reference to the labyrinth and the haphazard, errant nature of life in which we are prey to our surroundings in his fourth novel *L'Incubation*. In this novel, the narration imitates the protagonists' aimless pub-crawling in Montreal which is compared in turn to citizens during World War II fleeing like rats in "rep-lis intestinaux" (38) 'intestinal tract of the city' (18) of London's underground and its "réseau arachnéen" (37) 'pitch-black web' (18)

of streets. This nightmarish imagery is also hellish at times as many gutted buildings dart “de monstrueuses langues de feu” (58) ‘monstrous fiery tongues’ (29).

Despite being much less explicit in *La Bagarre*, the same menacing vision is conveyed by descriptions of Montreal’s buildings. Silvery, for example, while looking “à moitié mort” (105) ‘half dead’ (77), says that the façades are “rueuses aux jalousies percées en meurtrières” (84) ‘rough façades with slotted shutters’ (62).¹² This ominous description is echoed later on when he peeks inside a vaudeville house where a “chanteuse de couleur en robe rouge” ‘colored female singer in a fire-red dress’ with “des contorsions vipérines [...] glapissait un spiritual que deux escogriffes en costume de matelots punctuaient de cris sauvages” (87) ‘writhing like a snake and screeching a spiritual as two great lumps of men in sailor suits punctuated the song with wild yells’ (65).

Here, Bessette plays perversely on the Church’s traditionally negative perception of the city and its subsequent representation in the “roman du terroir” ‘novel of the land.’¹³ The specifically subversive nature of such descriptions in *La Bagarre* with respect to religion becomes transparent in the depiction of the illuminated cross atop Mount Royal in *Le Cycle*. Called “superstitieuse” ‘superstitious’ and an “antenne fourchue garnie de feux rouges intermittentes” (158) ‘forked antenna decorated with flashing red lights’ (120), the cross is forked like a snake’s tongue and thus transformed from a revered object into a bestial, deceptive one. This representation of Montreal and those found in *La Bagarre* reflect not only Bessette’s ambivalence towards the city, but a deformation of its iconic status within Quebec literature. In *Le Semestre*, Bessette’s fictional double—Omer Marin, an aging French professor at Princess University in Narcotown, Ontario—recalls moving to Montreal as a child as if it were a nightmare, calling it “la monstrueuse métropole ambivalentée” (103) ‘the monstrous ambivalent metropolis.’

Although Montreal is the backdrop for most of Bessette’s novels, Narcotown—a caricature of Kingston, Ontario—is the setting for *L’Incubation* and then again in *Le Semestre*. It is described as a Sleepy Hallow of sorts where “tout se sait les murs ont des oreilles des bouches” (77) ‘everybody knows everything about everybody else, people will talk and the walls have ears’ (39) and the halfway

point between Toronto and Montreal.¹⁴ Despite being subject like Montreal to Bessette's irony, Kingston/Narcotown is symbolic of his penchant for hybridity or liminality, traits that Cohen associates not only with monstrous deviations but more importantly with questioning "binary thinking" (6). Indeed, Kingston's geographic situation suits Bessette's status as a peripheral, yet important figure in French Canadian literature, a term that he preferred to "Québécois."¹⁵ Adopted in the 1960's to designate the affirmation of the province's national identity, the term also contains certain exclusionary and monolithic connotations that no doubt displeased the author that Robidoux justifiably calls "politically incorrect" in his article "Gérard Bessette, *Homo Ontariensis*?" 'Gérard Bessette, man of Ontario'¹⁶

Deviance: alcohol and sexuality

The taverns, as a complementary descriptive component for Montreal, are yet another deviant and somewhat monstrous symbol in *La Bagarre*. Associated with debauchery, the bars, most notably the second one, undermine the notion of civilization attached to urban spaces. This is clear, considering its description: "[s]ur les murs en couleurs criardes, se tordaient des arbres tropicaux peuplés d'animaux sauvages, tandis qu'au fond ... un tigre énorme gueule béante et griffes démesurées, bondissait vers les spectateurs" (77) 'On the walls, twisted tropical trees with wild animals in their branches were painted in gaudy colors; over the spectators' heads, an enormous tiger, with gaping mouth and outsized claws, was outlined in a pouncing position against a wide light purple background' (57). Populated by savage animals, the bar's somewhat kitschy walls refer to the idea that the city is an urban jungle and that such establishments are dangerous and monstrous places. Bessette plays on preconceived ideas with the taverns and parodies them. Sillery's reference to Rabelais's "dive bouteille" (10) 'divine bottle'—a poem that praises alcohol consumption—is indicative of Bessette's antagonism and his revolt against society's conservatism at the time. This is apparent when Sillery calls the third bar, *La Bougrine*, which ironically resembles a traditional lumberjack camp, "ces antres de perversité" (25) 'dens of iniquity' (20). This attempt to make a travesty of what is considered proper at the time becomes clear when Thérèse, Wes-

ton's conservative spinster friend, disapprovingly calls such establishments "vrais[s] repaire[s] pour les loups..." (235) 'a real wolf's lair' (167).

As the backdrop for the story, the taverns embody a Bakhtinian carnivalesque-like discourse, which seeks to play on preconceived ideas concerning alcohol. The subversive value of these bars comes to light when considering that they are also an intellectual meeting place in the novel in which the characters discuss Quebec's social, cultural and linguistics stakes. Sillery indirectly raises this idea when he calls Lebeuf a "Socrate de Cabaret" (26) 'nightclub Socrates' (21). This oblique intertextual reference to Plato's *Symposium*, the title of which means both a "drinking party" and an "academic meeting," subtly undermines any condemnation of drinking establishments. By conjuring up images of excessive alcohol consumption described within revered Greek philosophical texts that predate Christianity, Bessette not only undermines accepted views with respect to temperance, but also promotes a Dionysian approach to life. In the authors' works, alcohol is a constant, seditious element as can be seen through the excessive drinking habits of Hervé Jodoin in *Le Libraire*, of Gordon in *L'Incubation*, of Roch in *Le Cycle*, of Paulo in *La Commensale* (1975) 'Table companion' and of Marin during his youth in *Le Semestre*.¹⁷

Much like alcohol, sex and human sexuality are also topics that Bessette constantly explores in an attempt to once again challenge religious taboos that still haunt today's society, although to a significantly lesser extent. In fact, his works progressively contain more and more salacious scenes to the point where certain descriptions in *Le Cycle* and *Le Semestre* are bestial and almost pornographic. For example, Marin in *Le Semestre* imagines his illicit relationship with his student, Sandra in the following terms: "Omer qui avait la verge plutôt fluette jouissait de bien sentir les doubles lèvres de la vulve et les parois contractées du vagin comprimer son gland et frotter avec vigueur son phallus tumescent" (115) 'Omer who had a rather slender penis was climaxing at the thought of feeling the vulva's two lips and the contracting wall of the vagina compress his gland and vigorously rub his tumescent phallus.' Although sexual intercourse is never explicitly described in *La Bagarre*, one cannot help but notice the guileful nature of Lebeuf's remarks concerning his girlfriend

Marguerite with whom he cohabitates in order to write and avoid trips to the “lupanars” (29) or brothels.¹⁸ Having discussed “dumping her” with Weston in the opening scene of the novel, Lebeuf then returns to the apartment that he shares with Marguerite where, after a brief argument, he lays down beside her and thinks, “Il y a au moins ça.... Ça, c’est incontestable” (40) ‘*A least there’s this. That’s one thing certain*’ (31, original emphasis).

This subtle usage of *ça*, which refers in colloquial language to sexual intercourse and then to the Freudian *id* in French, alludes to the physical nature of his interests in the relationship. This is clear at the end of the novel when Marguerite thinks she is pregnant: “Au milieu du mois d’août, il y avait eu une alerte. Margot s’était crue enceinte. ... Heureusement, ce n’était qu’une fausse alarme” (326) ‘In Mid-August there had been a scare – Margot thought that she was pregnant. ... Luckily enough it had only been a false alarm’ (229). This provocative but essentially harmless description subtly defies Catholic dogma and foreshadows the deviant value of sexuality in Bessette’s later works.¹⁹ Although unexpected pregnancies are featured in other Quebec novels of the time, it is the ironic, subtle nature of the descriptions dealing with characters’ sexuality in *La Bagarre*, which give them a subversive, if not sinful dimension.

In later novels, Bessette suggests that intercourse is a physical necessity for men and even explores the question of incest in *Le Semestre* by proposing that Sandra, Marin’s student, has relations with him in order to purge herself of an incestuous experience with her father “pour exorciser le souvenir paternel” (180) ‘in order to exorcise the paternal memory.’ Although much less explicit, this monstrous act is alluded to in *La Bagarre* when Lebeuf helps a co-worker, Bill Lafrenière’s daughter, Gisèle. At once a father figure, teacher and friend to the girl, Lebeuf finds the adolescent attractive, “[u]ne vraie beauté” (120) ‘a true beauty’ and compares her to Natasha in Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*. Although natural, this attraction is made to appear perverse when Lebeuf is indirectly compared to the mythological divinity Pan. Sillery says while mocking the large singer in *La Bougrine*, “[u]ne vraie déesse Elle ne peut provenir que de l’accouplement d’une nymphe et d’un taureau...” (247) ‘A true goddess, ... She could only come from the mating of a nymph and a bull...’ (175). This specific mythical reference recurs in the novel

and hints at incongruous and potentially taboo nature of their relationship. While the intent here is to provoke, the intertextual parallel brings out the fact that allusions to such deviant behaviors were commonplace topoi not only in classical works, but also in nineteenth-century French literature. Here once again, Bessette plays on a somewhat sinister disposition that belies human behavior.

Subversive acts, embodiments and identities

Having already mentioned Sillery's homosexuality, it is important to note that he is never overtly named as such, but rather called a "[m]audit fifi" (105) 'goddam fruit' (77, original emphasis) a typically Québécois insult in times past. As a decadent, Oscar Wilde-like persona, Sillery is an exceptional and provocative character for Quebec literature at the time. His specifically over-the-top French effeminate demeanour, verbosity, wit and savant psychoanalytical and mythological references clash with Quebec's habitant culture and signal Bessette's desire to defy perceived norms with regard to sexual practices. Having tried to seduce a young man at a bowling alley during his nocturnal wanderings, Sillery incarnates the mischievousness and deviance formerly associated with men of his sexual orientation. This is apparent when he feels haunted during one outing by the "apparition" (41) of a man seemingly stalking him. Fearing what in English is known as gay-bashing, he describes Quebec's disdainful attitude towards homosexuality at the time by saying, "Les sodomites soulèvent autour d'eux, sans le vouloir, des haines implacables" (41-42) 'Sodomites often unwittingly stir up inexorable hatred around themselves' (32). This apparition reinforces the uncanny atmosphere in the novel in which otherness or the "return of the repressed" is underlined in order to illustrate the hypocrisy of the time.²⁰ As Timothy Beal explains in *Religion and its Monsters*:

The *unheimlich* encounter with the monstrous is a revelation not of the wholly other but of a repressed otherness within the self. The monster, as personification of the *unheimlich*, stands for that which has broken out of the subterranean basement or the locked closet where it has been hidden and largely forgotten. (qtd. in Kearney 35, original emphasis)

Tormented by what he calls his “condition” (108) Sillery wonders why he cannot change his nature (84), but finally accepts it by comparing his orientation to a physical deformity, “Rien à faire, comme quand on naît borgne ou manchot” (108) ‘Nothing to do about it. Like being born one-eyed and one-armed’ (80). This statement suggests that homosexuality—perceived as a monstrosity of sorts at the time—is a natural, involuntary, innate disposition. Lebeuf further confirms this idea and opposes popular belief by stating, “Sillery n’était pas un mauvais diable, après tout. Il fallait seulement l’accepter tel qu’il était....” (308) ‘Sillery was not a bad sort after all. You simply had to accept him as he was...’ (217). Here, Bessette explains that Sillery’s devilishness is neither immoral nor deviant, but rather a simple variant in nature.

This is also the case in *Les Anthropoïdes* in which fellatio, practiced by certain male characters, is depicted as a normal and not an anomalous activity. Reminiscent once again of ancient Greece, these acts take place before the dawn of Christianity and thus chronologically challenge the perception that homosexuality is sinful and deviant. The fact that Sillery, feeling *chassé* ‘hunted’ and chased from Montreal, leaves for a *rimbaldien* ‘Rimbaud-like’ adventure in Africa with “de sympathiques anthropophages” (323) ‘with congenial cannibals’ (227) that Western society in turn sees as savages, ironically illustrates the inhuman and intolerant nature of such a civilization. In other words, Bessette shows that by embracing Arthur Rimbaud’s otherness whereby “Je est un Autre,” ‘I is another’ Sillery is actually less monstrous than the society that is persecuting him. The paradoxical nature of this idea is also indirectly conveyed by the fact that Sillery is reading Blaise Pascal’s *Pensées* ‘Thoughts.’ Despite being a strict seventeenth-century Jansenist philosopher, Pascal describes the human condition as being naturally “monstrous” (Frag 169, 101) and states that “he who would act the angel acts the brute” (Frag 193, 112).

The significance of alterity with respect to the human condition, and then to identity, particularly Quebec’s, is further dealt with through Jules Lebeuf’s name, physical description and his socio-cultural concerns. Named Jules, a colloquial term equivalent to “guy” in English, Lebeuf’s last name, meaning the beef or bull designates his size as well as the animalesque side of his personality. A hybrid

of sorts—half man, half beast—, he is regarded by Lafrenière as “une espèce de surhomme” (112) ‘some kind of super man’ (83) and then by his daughter, Gisèle as “une espèce de géant” (119) ‘a kind of giant’ (87). Lebeuf seems to literally embody contradiction in the sense that his massive hairy hands, brush-cut reddish hair, protruding forehead, wide nose, grey owl-like eyes and heavy clown-like walk clash with his intellectual prowess. Indeed, the further application of the term “colosse” (9) ‘colossus’ to describe Lebeuf seems ironically to incarnate Pascal’s portrayal of the human condition and the need to relativize notions of normalcy.

This hybridity is further reinforced by Lebeuf’s “double vie” (39) ‘double life’ and the intertextual reference to Balzac’s *Le Père Goriot* ‘The Father Goriot’ that he is reading. Although implicit, this well-known reference reminds us not only of Balzac’s taxonomy whereby humans are animal types, but also of the fact that this French classic is dedicated to Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire (father of Teratology, the science of monsters). The idea that Lebeuf is a kind of human monster becomes clear when considering that his nickname is “Socrate de Cabaret” and that Socrates in Plato’s *Symposium* is compared to a satyr named, Silenus (100). In *Symposium*, Alcibiades explains that Socrates is like a Russian doll, with a god-like figurine inside and a monstrous exterior, an image used by Rabelais in his prologue to *Gargantua* so as to encourage readers to go beyond superficial readings of the text.²¹ In this way, one then understands that Lebeuf’s animalesque and caricatured description and those of the Tramway workers are not the result of a simple misanthropic whim, but are indicative of Bessette’s vision that humans are naturally polymorphous and thus, to a certain extent, monstrous in terms of their physique and constitution.

Having described Charlot, for example as an Italian with a “face de gorille” (66) ‘gorilla-faced’ (49), Bessette depicts Bouboule, the worker who lost his job for hitting the foreman as having “bras bal-lants et démesurés, sa démarche incertaine lui donnaient l’aspect d’un somnambule” (63) ‘long swinging arms and [a] shaky gait, he looked like a sleepwalker’ (47). This deformation of human physiognomy, which Bessette pursues in *Les Pédagogues* (1961) ‘The Pedagogues,’ becomes explicit in *L’Incubation* where Bouboule’s description can be recognized in the passage commonly known as

homo erectus.

la colonne vertébrale peu à peu se désarquant se verticalisant les bras peu à peu devenant trop courts les jambes trop longues cette ridicule pénible démarche d'échassier ... ce monstrueux cerveau cette excroissance tératologique se balançant dodelinant au bout d'un cou grêle d'indonnesque se mettant à sécréter distiller cette moisissure épiphénoménale la pensée. (152)

the spinal column straightening bit by bit into the perpendicular, the arms becoming bit by bit too short the legs too long, then the awkward laughable gait like walking on stilts ... that monstrous brain that teratological excrescence dandled unsteadily on the end of a spindly turkey-neck starting in to secrete and deposit that epiphenomenal mildew called thought. (82)

Despite being somewhat tongue-in-cheek, this monstrous description of Man which devolves to the point where characters in *Les Anthropoïdes* are in fact ape-men reflects Bessette's Darwinian vision of humans. Obviously contradictory to Christianity's portrayal of human beings as created in the image of God and embodying his children, the author's belief in Evolution is indirectly raised in *La Bagarre* when Sillery ironically names his friends "[i]ndomptables *struggle-for-lifers*" (304).²² By means of this reference to the survival of the fittest, Bessette raises the separation of human beings from their animal counterparts and highlights the importance of acknowledging the inherent bestiality of humans which society, as inspired by the Church, too often effaced in the past. Indeed, the narrator's remarks with respect to Sillery, and his rimbaldian aspirations in *La Bagarre*, deconstruct certain idealistic visions of humankind by alluding to an underlying plurality and primitivism that need to be recognized.

Monstrosity: to be embraced, not erased

Criticized for his zoological portrayal of human beings, which Marin in *Le Semestre* calls *singes nus* 'naked apes,' Bessette's vision coincides with Lebeuf's initial overview of Montreal. Indeed, Bessette exposes what lies beneath and thus challenges the importance placed on the notion of homogeneity by both society and the

Church. In *La Bagarre*, Lebeuf's heterogeneous physique and character are used as a means of dealing with Quebec's identity crisis during the late 1950's and its subsequent transformation into what is generally perceived as a more unified, separate and distinct society during the Quiet Revolution. Although the historical conjecture is not mentioned in *La Bagarre*, Lebeuf is torn by the province's multifarious composition which he ironically embodies, "L'université d'un côté, les balayeurs de l'autre; entre les deux, toute une variété de classes sociales ... Superposés à tout ça, deux groupes ethniques de mentalité et de langues différentes" (39) 'The university on one side, the sweepers on the other. Between the two, a wide range of social classes. Topping off the whole thing, two ethnic groups, with different ways of thinking and different languages' (30). As a metaphor for Quebec, Lebeuf struggles constantly with his identity but knows that he wants to "relever le niveau intellectuel" (270) '*raise the intellectual level*' (190, original emphasis) of his native land that he sees as lagging behind from a socio-cultural and linguistic point of view. As Ronald Sutherland explains, "He is a complex, confused character, just as Quebec in the current period of transition is complex and confused" (34).

The conservative, generally anti-progressive attitude of certain Quebecers at the time is what is truly monstrous in *La Bagarre*²³ and is embodied by Lebeuf's narrow-minded girlfriend Marguerite who is revolted by her boyfriend's criticisms of French Canadians: "Les Canadiens parlent mal; les Canadiens lisent mal; les Canadiens écoutent des programmes idiots.... Ils font jamais rien de ben, les Canadiens, à ton dire !" (37) 'Québécois don't speak proper, Québécois don't read books. Québécois do this, Québécois do that. To your mind, the Québécois never do a damned thing right' (29). Frustrated by such comments, Marguerite sees Lebeuf as a hypocrite and more monstrous than the grass-root Quebecers that he, in part, belongs to as a tramway worker. She expresses this idea by saying, "Mais toi, quoi c'est que tu veux devenir au juste. J'ai jamais été capable de te l'faire dire" (38) 'But what the hell is it you want to be? I've never been able to get it out of you' (30). Marguerite's inability to describe what she sees as Lebeuf's hypocritical status as both a proud laborer and student who criticizes certain aspects of Quebec is also characteristic of the monstrous and complements his physical descrip-

tion. According to Pierre Ancet, “[l]e concept courant de monstre n’indique pas une catégorie, mais l’impossibilité de catégoriser, un au-delà de la connaissance commune” (16) ‘the current concept of a monster does not indicate a category, but the impossibility of categorizing, something beyond common knowledge.’

The critique of grass-roots Quebec is also indirectly presented through Lebeuf’s failure to help Lafrenière’s daughter Gisèle break free from her stymied milieu by pursuing her exceptional ability in mathematics. Uncharacteristic for women at the time, Gisèle’s competence, which represents hope for her sex and the province in Lebeuf’s eyes, is thwarted by her father. Fearing that she will marry an Englishman and lose her French if she attends Sir George William College, he prevents her from doing so despite the fact that this English-speaking institution’s flexible schedule would allow her to work part-time and thus pay her studies, unlike at French-language universities in Montreal.²⁴ This subtle critique of the xenophobia and short-sightedness of certain Quebecers at the time represents a travesty of sorts in the novel in which Lebeuf’s remarks are not always favored, however, by the author.

Complex in nature, Lebeuf’s desire to see his province become more progressive is tempered when dealing with Quebec’s French, which he loathes by saying that the province needs “du français moderne à doses massives, pour compenser ce qu’on entend à la journée longue” (79) ‘massive doses of modern French to compensate for what we hear around here all day long...’ (58). For Lebeuf, Quebec’s linguistic situation is “désorganisé, inconscient, sans cohésion” (82) ‘disorganized, indifferent and incoherent’ (60) and thus, an abnormality that must be corrected. Such remarks, which coincide with attacks made at the time on *joual* ‘Quebec’s sociolect,’ are part and parcel of society’s more general desire for homogeneity. Despite the validity of Lebeuf’s other criticisms, this particular remark is thwarted by Sillery and Weston who challenge their friend’s opinion by mentioning the importance of his philology course with respect to this matter. While calling philology a “Satan Trimégiste” (81) ‘Satan thrice powered,’²⁵ Sillery explains that it is a diabolical way of showing “la relativité de toutes langues et leur constante évolution [and that] elle nous fait sentir moins singuliers, moins *outcasts*...” (81, original emphasis) ‘the relativity of all languages and

their constant evolution, it makes one feel less singular, less of an outcast...’ (59). Weston, a character who contradicts stereotypes of American linguistic ignorance, also confirms Sillery’s idea by declaring, “Tu as la chance d’appartenir à un milieu différent, qui a une langue un peu différente, tu as ça, comment dis-tu? *within your reach*...?” (82, original emphasis) ‘You have the chance of belonging to a different milieu which has a slightly different language. That’s a distinctiveness right within your reach’ (60).

Similar to the opening of the novel, the use of French and English here signals the importance of both Quebec’s and Lebeuf’s dual nature and further reinforces the idea that the perceived deviant nature of Quebec’s French is a characteristic to be embraced, not erased. This was, however, unfortunately not understood by certain critics at the time such as Laure Rièse who sees both the portrait of Montreal and the language as abominations:

The novel’s explanatory criticism of the milieu of Montreal is difficult to reconcile with the function of a work of fiction. Bessette’s observation of French Canadian problems would be more effective were they not marred by the inartistic use of crude and vulgar language and Canadianisms. (180)

Having misunderstood the valorization of colloquial language in *La Bagarre*, Rièse also fails to see the irony in Lebeuf’s initial criticism and the relevance of hybridity to Quebec’s identity.

Bessette communicates this idea metaphorically through the absence of a single main character in the novel in which Lebeuf, Sillery and Weston represent individual parts of Quebec’s socio-historical persona. Indeed, Sillery represents France’s intellectual and linguistic culture while Weston embodies Quebec’s pioneering spirit and geographic situation. Torn between the two is Lebeuf who struggles with his identity due to the fact that he is a combination of both friends and thus a hydra of sorts. Although problematic for Lebeuf, his plurality vouches for the old adage whereby “more heads are better than one,” especially given the conclusion of the novel in which Lebeuf, alone, ends up abandoning his studies and thus his dreams of being a writer, to become a Tramway Company *contremaître*. This term, despite being translated in English as foreman, means in reality counter-master and thus indirectly designates the significance of not adopting the uniformity associated with authori-

tative and monolithic positions.

The Scapegoat of *The Brawl*

Although it is difficult to establish parallels between characters and their author, Lebeuf's brawl that occurs in more or less the middle of *La Bagarre* and its symbolic meaning allows us to understand Bessette's own marginal position within Quebec's literary history. The brawl, which pits the staff of *La Bougrine* against Lebeuf when he tries to remove Gisèle from the vaudeville tavern and protect her from its off-color performances, is the result of different perceptions. Perceived as a "brute" (248) and then as a "taureau" (251) by the bouncers due to his display of superhuman strength, Lebeuf also acts in a heroic way. This is clear when Sillery mockingly describes Lebeuf as a Herculean figure after the fight by saying, "Qui vois-je? N'ai-je point devant ma vue ce héros légendaire sous les coups vaillants duquel s'ébranlèrent jadis ... les colonnes du temple 'bougrinal'" (301) 'Whom do I see? Is it not the legendary hero, under whose valiant blows ... the columns of the Bougrinal temple collapsed?' (213). Despite the facetious nature of this comment, which indirectly compares Lebeuf to Hercules, it signals the symbolic importance of this moment in the novel where Lebeuf, like the legendary hero, finds himself at "une croisée de chemin" (268) or a 'cross-roads' in his life. Indeed, the bar fight is the physical manifestation of the real dilemma facing Lebeuf in which his individual literary aspirations conflict with the collective well-being of the tramways workers. By accepting to become foreman at the Montreal Tramway Company, Lebeuf will help reinstate a fellow co-worker, but will forfeit his studies and his hopes of becoming a writer. Confronted with a difficult situation, he becomes the *contremaître* but ends up shortly thereafter being alienated by his co-workers who perceive him as an administrator and, more perversely, as a traitor of sorts.

The parallel between this situation, interpreted by Gilles Marcotte in terms of Quebec being on the verge of the Quiet Revolution, and Bessette's becomes clearer when reconsidering the author's rejection by the University of Montreal following the completion of his doctorate. Alienated by a people not quite ready to accept his difference, Bessette resembles Lebeuf who becomes a scapegoat. Indeed, he is described indirectly as such later on in the novel

when Bill Lafrenière calls the workers “moutons” (181) ‘sheep’ and then treats Lebeuf as a “nouveau” (178), a term, which when deconstructed, forms the words “new” in English and “veau” ‘calf’ in French. Like René Girard’s scapegoat that is compared to a derridian *pharmakon*—both a poison and a remedy—Lebeuf’s difference becomes a “monstrous” (21)²⁶ trait at the end of the novel where he is described as an “animal vaseux” (293) or “beast” (193) doing rounds in the terminus station.

Making a difference

Without exaggerating Bessette’s alienation in Quebec literature, it is difficult to ignore the usefulness of this comparison in that it allows us to highlight similarities and differences between Lebeuf and his author. Unlike Lebeuf whose demise stems from the fact that he abandons his hybridity—his only “originalité” (206)—and then ignores his *daimon* or his inspiration to write, Bessette does not don a “uniforme de contremaître” (318) ‘foreman’s uniform.’²⁴ He explains as much in a 1970 interview with Jean-Pierre Guay by saying that his motto is “L’ennui naquit un jour de l’uniformité” (46) ‘Boredom is born the day of uniformity.’ Although not stated explicitly in the novel, the denouement illustrates this statement and thus reflects Bessette’s literary aesthetic whereby ideas are represented, rather than being told. Like the etymology of the word monster then, Bessette’s aesthetic *montre* ‘shows’ or teaches us that true monstrosity results from blindly conforming to the status quo and that monstrous traits, more often than not, are realities to be accepted if not embraced as an integral part of being human. Indeed, the title of the novel, which can be deconstructed as *là-bas, gare* meaning “over there” be “careful,” seems to warn against dichotomist, homogenous-seeking tendencies.

Alienated to a large extent throughout his career, Bessette embraced his difference and a deconstructive position that Jacques Derrida says others envision as a monstrosity at the end of *Writing and Difference* “under the species of the nonspecies, in the formless, mute, infant and terrifying form of monstrosity” (293). Despite being profoundly Québécois, Bessette never hesitated to question perceived norms, and most notably those which he experienced during his youth in Quebec. In this way, he effectively ignored Marguerite’s

statement with respect to Lebeuf in *La Bagarre*, “Mais on peut pas être deux choses en même temps, à cheval sur la clôture” (38). ‘But you can’t be two things at once. You can’t sit on the fence’ (30). In fact, Bessette’s affinity for liminality is evident by his choice to remain in Kingston, and through his auto portrait in *Le Semestre*, in which Marin says that although he was born a “*homo quebecensis*” ‘man of Quebec’ circumstances have transformed him into a “*homo (à demi) ontarionesis*” ‘man (partly) of Ontario’(133-34).²⁸

This metamorphosis can also be linked to Lebeuf’s character who, despite his demise at the end of *La Bagarre*, reappears in *Les Pédagogues* as a union leader trying to help a dissident French teacher combat xenophobia and incompetence in Quebec’s Catholic Education system. The uncertainty with respect to the success of this fight is similar to Bessette’s struggle against intolerance and his attempt to settle certain scores with a society that initially rejected him and to which he never again fully belonged.

This is apparent in *Le Semestre*, in which he caricatures many of his contemporaries with whom he never saw eye to eye. Marin explains that he was “solitaire car il n’avait pas davantage réussi à entretenir un commerce amical avec des écrivains québécois de sa génération” (188) ‘alone as he hadn’t been any more successful in entertaining a friendly exchange with the Quebec writers of his generation.’ While also caricaturing himself as the aging predatory French professor, Bessette/Marin makes fun of individual critics such as Allard who becomes “Jacques Hilaré” (41) and then Quebec writers such as Victor-Lévy Beaulieu and Anne Hébert who are nicknamed “Butor-Ali Nonlieu” (103) and “Âne Chambredebois” (71).²⁹ In this novel, Bessette transfers the monstrosity that he has appropriated to others such as critic and author, Nicole Brosard whose feminist discourse becomes deformed “pauvres bougres d’humains qui avaient pour leur malheur un cinquième membre (rabougri-tératologique) dans l’entre-jambes” (104) ‘poor buggers of human beings who had for their burden a fifth member (shriveled-teratological) between their legs.’ Although perhaps reprehensible, these deformations are original literary innovations within the scope of Quebec literature and designate the importance of such attempts to a minority literature. Indeed, Bessette’s monstrification of his contemporaries has several functions. While illustrating his

fierce individualism and a certain disregard for solidarity within literary circles, such remarks with respect to the innovations or lack thereof of certain authors and critics, draw attention to their works not to mention to Quebec literature in general, and finally, to the idea that transgression is key to dialogue and progress.

The function of Bessette's deviance is clear when Marin, similar to Lebeuf, expresses his wish to see Quebec rival other nations: "pourquoi toujours les Européens pourquoi pas de temps en temps des Québécois pourquoi pas moi aussi inventeur-découvreur" (106) 'why always the Europeans, why not from time to time Quebecers why not me too inventor-discoverer.' By effectively playing on the notion of deviance and deformation, that is to say, the "dualité schizophréneuse" (*Le Semestre* 213) 'schizophrenic duality' of the country that frustrated Lebeuf, Marin/Bessette seeks to innovate on the literary stage. The specific nature of Bessette's innovation is clear if we consider that Annie Montaut employs the term "groupe artificiel, mot monstre" (260) 'artificial group, monster word' to designate the frequent usage of portmanteau words and hyphenated descriptive word chains. What is more, Marin points out the deviant nature of *Le Semestre* which further breaks from tradition by mixing several different literary genres when he calls the text he is (supposedly) writing a "monstre hybride" (40).³⁰

The extremely innovative and unique patchwork that is *Le Semestre*, was not however appreciated by all, most notably Jacques Ferron who entitled his review of the novel "*Le Semestre ou le vieux Narcisse*" 'The Semester or the old Narcisse.' Depicted in the novel as "Jack MacFerron," Ferron highlights the fact that Bessette caricatures friends and colleagues and yet wants to be remembered by the literary institution (267). As such, Ferron fails to sufficiently underline the novel's irony and see that Bessette's monstrous narcissism was a provocative means of dealing with hypocrisy, expressing his own opinions and showing the true tensions underlying human relations.³¹ In other words, he does not recognize the importance of Marin's efforts to strangle the ideal of "respect humain" (258) in the novel in order to effectively become truly "humain" (48) and finally become himself ("commencer à être moi," 181 'begin to be myself'). Indeed, *Le Semestre* develops many of the deviant elements already present in *La Bagarre* in an effort to underline the multiplicity, im-

perfections and contradictions contained within the human *moi* or ego. Ahead of his time by the moral questioning of his work both as a writer and a critic, Bessette also seems to ultimately reflect the growing individualism of his time, which although perhaps still unavowed and unrecognized, was nonetheless also present in the works of many of his contemporaries.³²

Conclusion

Similar to the 'Tramway workers' reactions towards Lebeuf's selfless actions, Marin's efforts to reconcile his monstrosity and individualistic spirit with a certain collectivity have been generally unsuccessful. In fact, it would seem that despite voicing his concerns in *Le Semestre*, Bessette has been more or less alienated within Quebec literature due in part to the expression of his *je* 'I', a term homonymous with *jeux* or games in French. Such games appear to have neither been appreciated, nor perceived as such by many of his readers. Indeed, it would seem that only a handful of critics have truly understood that Bessette's monstrous aesthetic, the beginnings of which can be traced back to *La Bagarre*, is in reality a form of humanism. Lasnier, mentioned at the beginning of this article, is evidently one of them as he entitled his recent psychobiography of Bessette's life and works *La Mort d'Omer Marin, anthropoïde* (2007) 'The Death of Omer Marin, anthropoid.' Playing in his title on Bessette's fictional double in *Le Semestre* and then on the author's favourite novel *Les Anthropoïdes*, Lasnier's essay hints at the author's current dire situation and the need to revive interest in his works. In effect, by rereading Bessette's works and *La Bagarre* particularly in terms of its ending, it is clear that they act like Cohen's monsters who "come back" to ask us "how we have misrepresented what we have attempted to place" and "to reevaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance towards its expression" (20).

Clearly a worthwhile enterprise, rereading *La Bagarre* in terms of Bessette's entire works, especially *Le Semestre*, exposes the manner in which the author first showcased the monstrous elements that characterized his later works, as well as their subversive symbolic value with respect to the status quo at the time. Finally, the novel's setting, characters and plot, when analyzed together, work

as an heuristic tool that allows us to understand how the fight Bessette initially described through Jules Lebeuf is representative of his own transformation into a *monstre sacré*, that is to say a character who, like Omer Marin, is both revered and cursed within French Canada's literary institution.

Notes

1 Absent from Jacques Beaudry's *Anthologie: confrontations des écrivains d'hier à aujourd'hui. Tome 3: de la Nouvelle-France au Québec actuel* (2007), Bessette is covered, however, in Michel Biron's major anthology, *Histoire de la littérature québécoise* (2007).

2 All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

3 In addition to Robidoux's book-length study on Bessette's works, see his recently published article "Gérard Bessette, Homo Ontariensis?" Also see Paré's recent article "Gérard Bessette, philologue" as well as his chapter on Bessette in *Théories de la fragilité*, 54-65.

4 "La Grande Noirceur" 'the Great Darkness' is associated in Quebec's collective conscience with the fifteen year period following the end of World War II as well as Maurice Duplessis's time as Premier of Quebec (1936-39, 1944-59).

5 See *Mes Romans et moi*, 84.

6 In an interview with Jean-Pierre Guay, Pierre Tisseyre, Bessette's editor at the time, explains, "*Le Libraire* ... m'a fait peur.... Comme j'avais eu des ennuis avec l'Église pour *Évadé de la nuit* [d'André Langevin], j'avais dit à Bessette: - Hum, si je le publie, ça va me causer des ennuis. Il faudrait qu'il soit publié en France. Alors, je pourrais le reprendre. Je serai en quelque sorte couvert par cette publication" (220) '*Not for Every Eye* ... scared me.... As I had problems with the Church with *Évadé de la Nuit* [by André Langevin], I said to Bessette: - Hmm, if I publish it, it's going to cause me problems. It has to be published in France. Then, I could take it back. I would be covered in ways by this publication.'

7 I will purposely avoid analyzing *Le Libraire* in this article as I have done so in terms of its monstrous aesthetic in another article, "L'esthétique du monstrueux dans *Le Libraire* (1960) de Gérard Bessette."

8 Bessette's last published work was *Les Dires d'Omer Marin* (1985) 'The sayings of Omer Marin.' A short, strange piece of fiction, it has been described as a novella and an afterthought to Bessette's entire work.

9 See among others, Richard Kearney's *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* (2003), *Monsters & Philosophy* (2005) edited by Charles Wolfe, *Qu'est-ce qu'un mon-*

stre? (2005) 'What is a monster?' edited by Annie Ibrahim, Pierre Ancet's *La Phénoménologie des corps monstrueux* (2006) 'Phenomenology of monstrous bodies' and *Monstres et monstrueux littéraires* (2008) 'Literary Monsters and Monstrousness' edited by Marie-Hélène Larochelle.

10 This period called "la Révolution tranquille" is considered a period of intense but nonviolent change and modernization in Quebec's history that began with the election of Premier Jean Lesage in 1960. Having ended before 1970, the time frame is characterized by the secularization of health care and education, the creation of a welfare state, economic reforms and massive investment in infrastructure.

11 In Christianity, the ritual of baptism has been traditionally associated with an infant's soul and welcoming them into the (religious) community.

12 The English here does not translate the sense of *jalousie* 'jealousy' or *meurtrières* 'murderous.'

13 See *terroir* novels like *Jean Rivard, défricheur* (1862) by Antoine Gérin-Lajoie or *Menaud, maître-draveur* (1937) by Félix-Antoine Savard.

14 Washington Irving's story "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" (1820) takes place in Tarrytown, a village situated north of New York City. There is a town named Kingston about 75 kilometers from Tarrytown. Its geographic situation resembles that of Kingston, Ontario. Situated on the Hudson River (whose name reminds us of Hudson Bay) which empties into the Atlantic, Tarrytown/Sleepy Hollow is similar to Kingston, situated at the tip of Lake Ontario, downstream from the St. Lawrence that also empties into the Atlantic.

15 During conversations with Irene Bessette in Kingston after her husband's passing, she insisted on several occasions that the author preferred to be called a French Canadian author.

16 In this part of his article, Robidoux cites a passage in *Le Semestre* in which Omer Marin mocks Quebec's nationalism as expressed by student attitudes during a teaching year at Laval (Laval) University in 1966-67. This scene for Robidoux describes Bessette's year at Laval and his ambivalent attitude toward his native province.

17 See Michael Cronin's article "Vertige et le dépassement de soi: Les Écrans alcooliques de Gérard Bessette." *Canadian Studies* 35 (1993): 199-204.

18 In *La Commensale* and then, especially in *Le Semestre*, the main characters mention experiences in brothels. Such experiences are described in graphic detail in *Le Semestre* (60, 196-97).

19 The theme of a false pregnancy is further explored by means of miscarriages in *L'Incubation* (69-70) and *Le Semestre*. It would seem to result from a trau-

matic reality that Bessette experienced with his first wife in Pittsburgh if we accept what Marin says in *Le Semestre*, “protozaire monstrueux sanglant emporté par les eaux de la Monongahela non non” (246) ‘monstrous bloody protozoon carried off by the waters of the Monongahela, no, no.’ The notion of a miscarriage also ties in with the unpredictability of Nature and the Evolutionary notion of the “survival of the fittest.”

20 Freud cites Jentsch with respect to uncertainty: “In telling a story, one of the most successful devices for easily creating uncanny effects is to leave the reader in uncertainty whether a particular figure in the story is a human being or an automaton” (227).

21 In *Quand les écrivains québécois jouent le jeu*, Bessette says he would like to be like Rabelais.

22 In *Le Semestre*, Marin seems to repeat Sillery when speaking about the “*struggle-for-life*” (14, original emphasis).

23 The historical accuracy of such portrayals of Quebec has been contested by certain historians and so it is noteworthy to state that Bessette’s representation of the province before the Quiet Revolution in *La Bagarre* corresponds to his own experience of it.

24 With respect to this institution, known today as Concordia University, Lebeuf says, “Les étudiants canadiens-français, ils ne travaillent pas usuellement. Et ils ont moins de *scholarships* que les étudiants anglais canadiens” (198, original emphasis) ‘French Canadian students, they do not usually work. And they have less scholarships than English Canadian students.’

25 “Satan thrice powered” is a reference to Baudelaire’s poem “Au Lecteur” ‘To the Reader’ in *The Flowers of Evil*.

26 In “What is a myth” (33-35), Girard associates the scapegoat to Hercules (34). Later on describes it in terms of a *pharmakos* (121-23).

27 In *Donner la mort* ‘*The Gift of Death*,’ Derrida explains that “the concept of the *daimon* crosses the boundaries separating the human from the animal and the divine” (5, original emphasis).

28 In *Le Semestre*, Marin explains that his ancestor was present at founding of Narcotown (Kingston), formerly named Fort Frontenac (274). Coincidentally, Bessette eventually resided on Frontenac Street in Kingston.

29 The derisory nature of these names is clear when translated. In Allard’s case, *Hilare* means hilarious. “Butor Non-lieu Ali” can be translated as “Oaf-Moot point Ali” while “Âne Chambrédebois” is “Jackass (Donkey) Woodenroom.” *Les Chambres de bois* (1958) is the title of Anne Hébert’s first novel, translated as *The Silent Rooms*.

30 In *Le Semestre*, Bessette mixes autobiographical realities, autofiction, a psychoanalysis of Gilbert La Rocque's novel *Serge d'entre les morts* (1976) with literary and philosophical reflections.

31 This oversight seems somewhat ironic as there are certain scenes in *Le Semestre*, notably the one in which Omer dreams of being captured in a cage, that are reminiscent of those experienced by Tinamer de Portanqueu, the main character in Ferron's *L'Amélanchier* (1970) 'The Juneberry Tree' (1975) in which he caricatures well-known Canadian Anglophone literary critic, Northrop Frye.

32 While speaking about the *biogramme bessettien*, Jacques Allard (2000) alludes to the individualistic spirit of *Le Semestre* by saying, "Ce sera le bonheur des récits narcissiques qui, au Québec, comme ailleurs sont venus si nombreux depuis 1980" (332) 'This will be a joy to narcissistic stories which, in Quebec as is the case elsewhere, have been numerous since 1980.' In a footnote, he cites Linda Hutcheon's *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (Wilfred Laurier P, 1980).

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