

Signposts to Quebec Literature

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Paul Gay, *Panorama littéraire du Canada français: Tome I: Notre Roman*. Hurtubise HMH, 1973. 192 pp. \$3.75 paper. *Tome II: Notre Poésie*. Hurtubise HMH, 1974. 199 pp. paper.

Paul Gay's two survey volumes, dealing respectively with the novel and the poetry of French Canada, offer to the reader, especially the high school student unfamiliar with Quebec literature, practical signposts to broad vistas. *Notre Roman* takes on the ambitious task of cataloguing novels and short stories from 1835 to 1972, while *Notre Poésie* surveys poetic writings in Quebec from the Pre-Conquest period to the present day.

The first volume of the series (entitled "Panorama littéraire du Canada français") is divided into two uneven parts. The first, limited to twenty pages, touches on prose writings of the nineteenth century. The second attempts, with some measure of success, to link twentieth century authors with specific themes such as childhood or war and includes an interesting grouping of writers under the heading "Les Voies de l'amour" (free love, unhappy love etc). The last chapter lists, surprisingly enough, more than thirty contemporary writers of what Gay calls "Novels in Miniature" ('contes', 'nouvelles' and 'récits').

Gay tries to arouse interest in his reader and to lead him to a reading of the texts themselves by various means: a brief introduction to the society and politics of the period described, a summary of the literary production of the author in question, and, frequently, a brief résumé of the plot of a particular novel. He often combines personal comments and reactions with appropriate quotations from critics which highlight the merits or weaknesses of the book concerned.

Notre Poésie sketchily summarizes the evolution of French Canadian poetry from 1606 to the present decade. Gay glances rapidly at the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, devoting a dozen pages each to pre- and post-Conquest poetry and to the Literary Movement of Quebec. Another thirty pages cover the period from Nelligan to Saint-Denys Garneau. The greater part of the book is reserved for the numerous poets publishing in the last thirty years.

As in his survey of the Quebec novel, Gay draws heavily but openly on the recent scholarship of specialist critics. Acknowledging, for example, his debt to Sister Jeanne d'Arc Lortie's excellent study, *La Poésie nationaliste au Canada français* (1606-1867), published recently by the Presses de l'Université de Laval, he underlines the dearth of

poetic activity during the French regime and then traces the beginnings of literary and political nationalism from 1760 to 1860. Subsequently, the Quebec and Montreal literary movements, the "terroiristes" and the "groupe des artistes" are treated briefly, with poets such as Saint-Denys Garneau, Anne Hébert and Alain Grandbois being gathered together under the rubric 'Le Voyage intérieur'. Two sections are particularly interesting: "Le Pays inventé", which discusses the Hexagone movement, Gaston Miron, Gatién Lapointe and Fernand Ouellette, among others; and "La Sorcellerie des mots", touching upon the recent poetic experiments of "globalistes" (e.g. Raoul Duguay) and the "formalistes" (e.g. Nicole Brossard).

Paul Gay's introductions to the novel and poetry of Quebec are frequently uneven in treatment. Several pages are reserved for some authors; others receive a mere paragraph and several as few as two or three lines. Bibliographies are brief and quotations from critics abound, invariably without further comment. The thematic approach to individual novels often blocks the reader's view of the total production of a particular author, and the chapter dealing with the impact of song and singers in the domain of poetry, though appropriate, is superficial and incomplete.

Despite these criticisms, Volumes I and II of the series "Panorama littéraire du Canada français" are extremely useful compendiums. Indexes of authors and works enable the reader to find pertinent references with speed and ease. The 'Table des matières' delineates content clearly. The printed page is pleasing to the eye. Paper covers and reasonable price bring both volumes within the reach of the average student. The latter is, of course, the francophone student of the high school and CEGEP level. The anglophone high school student will probably find the vocabulary quite difficult, but, like his Quebec and Franco-Ontarian counterparts, he will find his interest piqued by such eye-catching titles as "Révolte contre la société", "Pour la liberté" and "Célébration du pays". The student should realize, however, that one critic's evaluation of a writer represents merely a single point of view and in no way substitutes for a reading of the text itself. For the instructor wishing to keep abreast or catch up with literary developments in French Canada, Gay's two publications provide a thumbnail sketch of authors, titles, publishers and dates of publication. Indeed, a mere reading of the Table of Contents of each title will provide visual evidence of the breadth and intensity of Québécois writing in the past fifteen years. Two more titles are to appear in this series: Volume III - *Notre Théâtre* and Volume IV - *Nos Historiens et nos penseurs*. They should offer equally useful and important outlines of Quebec's rich and blossoming heritage.

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