

The promised winter theme of the title is evident in nearly all twenty-seven poems, sometimes obviously, sometimes obliquely. The imagery that carries the theme is always strong, sure. Snow spiders are "tentacled oracles / Spreading little winters," whose webs are hurled to earth "In tiny, mad blizzards"; hawks are "Thermal cowboys / riding autumn out / and rounding up winter"; a cloud is "a torn tattered cloud mother / her white belly swollen / with tiny snow children."

And the imagery of winter expands to give a sense of the land:

the countryside lying  
like some great wintering animal  
beside the highway  
in the sun

and the people, both general:

the world is full of winter people  
hibernating in winter caves  
feelings slowed to a minimum  
for survival  
in a world of below-zero humanity

and individual:

you began a personal migration  
as full of purpose and intent  
as geese salt and peppering the sky  
in southbound arrows.

There is also a delicate fibre of "story" that touches on the Indian condition. "For Keith — Who Will Not Trust Again" introduces a runaway boy of ten, "full of brown pride," who

arrived in a series of rusty half-  
tons; riding in the back with matted  
dogs and old lumber

and "Helen" tells of a girl "reeking with vanilla, and too many lovers" whom the poet addresses thus:

You are fourteen, Helen  
Even now the old squaw  
looks out from your eyes,  
and holds your hand  
to shuffle down  
to the beer parlour on Main Street.

The whole book speaks of the emotional climate of the prairie. While the cold and the hardship predominate, there is a strong underlying hope of alleviation, although the limit of its extent is fully realized:

Winter people —  
Praying for a chinook,  
Never daring to hope for a heat wave.

If there is any agent of "snowmelt," it is, for Spafford, the warmth of personal love:

Let winter melt through your pores  
To puddle at your feet  
and evaporate in the heat of two.

PEGEEN BRENNAN

## THREE FACES OF FRENCH CANADA

JACQUES FERRON, *Quince Jam*. Trans. by Ray Ellenwood. Coach House, \$6.50.

GABRIELLE ROY, *Garden in the Wind*. Trans. by Alan Brown. McClelland & Stewart, \$10.00.

BEN-ZION SHEK, *Social Realism in the French-Canadian Novel*. Harvest House.

THESE THREE BOOKS — one a work of criticism, the other two collections of short fiction — illustrate an extensive range in critical thought and literary practice in current French-Canadian writing. The most interesting result of considering them in juxtaposition is that the major thesis of the criticism does not account for the effectiveness of the fiction.

In his study of social realism in the modern French-Canadian novel, Ben-Zion Shek sets a curious problem for himself. Beginning with the obvious fact that Gabrielle Roy and Roger Lemelin were two of Canada's best novelists writing in French just after the Second World War, Shek argues that they established a tradition of social realism which can be traced in the work of their contemporaries and

successors. He commences with the masterpieces, exhaustively analyzing *Bonheur d'Occasion*, *Alexandre Chenevert* and Lemelin's Quebec City trilogy as urban novels which arise out of and comment upon specific socio-economic conditions. He then calls attention to secondary novels of the post-war decades which also deal with poverty, class struggle, labour disputes and similar matters of modern working life. Yet as Shek himself acknowledges, most of these secondary works are items of modest literary value which do not belong to the mainstream of recent Quebec fiction. Rather than declare that the tradition he seeks is hardly a tradition at all, but a phase which bloomed quickly and then modulated into another kind of writing (exemplified by Roy's own move from slice-of-life realism to more philosophical, metaphorical fiction), he shifts his definition of realism.

Shek coins the term "neo-realism" to describe the often politically motivated aesthetic experiments conducted by the generation which exploded upon the Quebec literary scene in the 1960's. This critical leap could work if his argument gave equal weight to realism and neo-realism, showing in detail how the former grew into the latter. As it stands, however, the book's title is misleading; it is essentially a study of two novels by Roy and three by Lemelin, brought up to date with two appended chapters dealing rather hastily with the work of recent writers. A simple page count indicates the imbalance: Shek devotes forty-six pages to *Bonheur d'Occasion* and thirty to *Alexandre Chenevert*; then he disposes of Hubert Aquin in four, Marie-Claire Blais in three, Roch Carrier in one, and all but ignores Anne Hébert.

Despite this difficulty, Shek's judgments are generally insightful, illuminated by a comprehensive knowledge of Quebec daily life and social history. Their presentation, however, does not do them jus-

tice. Basically a warmed-over dissertation, Shek's book suffers many of the common faults of thesis-writing: undigested lumps of plot summary, a compulsion to mention the opinion of every single critic in the field, and a pendantsically objective tone whose impersonality dulls the impact of cogent critical perceptions. In addition, conventional footnotes are replaced by a frustrating system of documentation which sends the reader scurrying to an inconvenient bibliography at the back. Thoroughly re-written, Shek's book could satisfy the current need for a comprehensive English-language study of the social ramifications of modern French-Canadian fiction.

Social realism, "neo" or otherwise, is not the motivating factor in the other two books under consideration, Gabrielle Roy's *Garden in the Wind* and Jacques Ferron's *Quince Jam*. Neither book locates its primary sense of reality in the external world determined by socio-economic circumstance. Instead they both begin from the inside, concentrating upon the subjective nature of perception. Roy establishes this inner focus in her choice of content, Ferron in his manipulation of narrative form.

Ferron's witty tales are controlled fantasies in which the fragmentation of the self and of reality is reflected in the fracturing of conventional narrative structures. Events and characters overleap the boundaries of the stories themselves, disappearing unresolved in one tale only to reappear unexpectedly in the next, as usual causal sequences collapse into dream-like surrealism. Verbal fluidity and patterns of recurrence replace the usual logic of cause and effect, yet Ferron's stylistic fluency creates an overall sense of continuity.

This is not to say that Ferron avoids all social commentary. In "Papa Boss," his sardonic version of a modern annunciation and immaculate conception, Ferron

applies his irreverent sense of illogicality to the materialism of the automobile age and the failure of organized religion. He plays with ironic double images: the virgin is replaced by a fallen nun and the annunciator angel is her landlord, a suicidal character named Gerald Pelletier whom, significantly, everyone keeps calling Gérard. Drifting into the hallucinatory core narrative are pieces of literary parody and odd encounters with distorted images derived from Quebec's folkloric and religious inheritance.

Woven into the other three interrelated stories is a series of doubles whose implications are simultaneously literary and political. Ferron poses the problem of the relation between the author and his characters when he eventually announces that he personally stands behind François Ménard, the introspective narrator of the nightmarish "Quince Jam," and declares autobiographical the charming glimpses into small-town Quebec life. Ménard's mission is to poison Frank Archibald Campbell, a "Montreal Rhodesian" to whose grandfather Ferron attributes verses by Bliss Carman and Duncan Campbell Scott. Ferron avows his hostility to the liberal Anglo-Saxon culture Frank represents (espoused most perniciously by Hugh MacLennan, he claims), yet he gives François and Frank more in common than their first names. Both are born in Maskinongé county, Ferron's own native ground. François recognizes Frank as the cop who had beaten him up twenty years earlier during a radical student demonstration and calls him "the skillful engineer and malicious witness of my sellout," but he also concedes the attractiveness of the image of the English gentleman. Upon seeing the (poisoned) quince jam François has brought to their weird midnight encounter, Frank is reminded of his own Quebec City childhood spent in an enclosed garden, yearning for the liberty and humanity of the

forbidden French world outside. Ferron appears to imply a sense of reciprocity between the two cultures: if not friends, they relate as adversaries, defining their separate identities against each other.

More conventional and accessible is Gabrielle Roy's *Garden in the Wind*. Like Ferron, Roy is a master stylist; in these four superbly crafted stories her controlled use of understatement heightens the loneliness and displacement of her characters. I am puzzled as to why Alan Brown, Roy's translator, changed the title from *Un Jardin au bout du monde*; the four stories share an end-of-the-world quality, the characters' physical distance from their native lands corresponding to their social and psychological alienation. Each tale concerns individual isolation in the immense Canadian West, and the need to root identity in a particular place. In the first, an engaging con-artist exploits the feeling of homelessness shared by the Québécois who emigrated to Manitoba. Pretending to come from the old villages left so many years ago, he moves from household to household, earning his keep by fabricating stories about the emigrants' long-lost relatives. His victims half-consciously comply with the deception because they yearn for the sense of identity he provides, yet feel deeply betrayed when the imposter is eventually unmasked.

These stories arise out of Gabrielle Roy's personal past, covering territory familiar to readers of her western fiction. In her introduction she explains that three of the four pieces are reworkings of older material; it almost appears that she returned to her own literary roots in order to describe individuals seeking compensation for their uprootedness.

A mood of poignant reflection pervades all four stories. Sam Lee Wong leaves China for a Saskatchewan village, attracted to a string of little hills on the horizon which strike a subliminal chord in his imagination. Due to a series of mis-

understandings, his hard-won acceptance climaxes ironically when the community forces him to leave by giving him a farewell party. He moves to another town, on the other side of the hills. But the rounded hills themselves, the emblem of his striving, he will reach only in death. In "Hoodoo Valley" a group of Doukhobour settlers, misled by the illusive light of sunset, selects a wasteland because it momentarily reminds them of home. And in the title story an old Ukrainian woman dying on a remote homestead in northern Alberta compensates for the failure of human love by pouring her final energies into her brilliant flower garden.

Despite these themes of mirage, displacement and isolation, Roy's writing is remarkably affirmative. She dwells less on defeat than on the will to persist, celebrating both idiosyncracies and universals of human behaviour with a masterful touch of restraint and affection.

CAROLE GERSON

## FERRON & FICTION

JACQUES FERRON, *Escarbouches*. 2 vols., Leméac.

JACQUES FERRON, *Wild Roses*. Translated by Betty Bednarski. McClelland & Stewart, \$6.95.

WHEN A NATION IS STRIVING to assume its identity, the avant-garde plays a significant role in giving voice to the aspirations of the masses. This phenomenon has been particularly apparent in Quebec, where it has often produced partisan criticism which obscures the distinction between good writing and effective propaganda. Jacques Ferron, the doctor-artist, speaks in a unique voice in which a distinction between craft and content cannot be made.

Discussing his role as an artist Dr. Ferron has said:

J'écris avec des mots qui ne me sont pas personnels mais avec des mots qui appartiennent à tout le monde. Le mot est un outil. C'est ainsi et je n'accepte pas du tout que l'écrivain soit considéré comme un homme de métier. Ecrire, c'est aujourd'hui un droit, une liberté semblable à la liberté de parole.

Nowhere is this philosophy more clearly illustrated than in *Escarbouches*, a two-volume collection of Ferron's occasional writings from 1948 to 1974. Defined literally as unimportant combat between a few members of two opposing armies, "escarbouches" also has a figurative sense — "disputer légerement." A subtitle, "la longue passe," extends this connotation. That the thrust is of a pen rather than a sword takes nothing from the sharpness of the attack. *Escarbouches* has three sections: "politiques," "médicales," and "littéraires." Ferron's literary criticism is sensitive; his social satire of hypocrisy and behavioural absurdity is both acute and funny; but his political satire is mordant, its force doubly apparent after the election of the Parti Québécois.

The tone is not consistently light. Indignation and outrage surface in an early article on the 1959 strike at Radio-Canada, the event that started René Levesque on a new political path. Jacques Ferron, too, spoke out: "La seule façon de sauver nos minorités: nous sauver nous mêmes." The English workers at CBC, he termed "des hypocrites et des Taitufe; des racistes dans toute la force du mot." In 1960, Ferron resigned from the P.S.D., Quebec wing of the C.C.F., after the Convention passed a resolution supporting self-determination for Algeria, but defeated the doctor's parallel motion demanding the same rights for French Canadians. In "Adieu au P.S.D." he begins in typical Ferronian style: "La C.C.F. est un parti ouesterne. Il est né de l'accouplement de monsieur Woodsworth et d'un bison, accouplement bizarre: le bison en est mort . . ."