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Critical Reception and Postmodern Violation of Generic Conventions in Jacques Brossard's "Monument aux marges": *L'Oiseau de feu*

AMY J. RANSOM

EXCITEMENT OVER WHAT APPEARED to be a monument of *la science-fiction québécoise* (SFQ) in the making accompanied the release of *L'oiseau de feu-1. Les années d'apprentissage* (1989), the first volume of a new series by Jacques Brossard. Its author swept Canada's awards for genre literature in 1990, receiving the Casper (now the Aurora Prize) for best work in French, as well as Québec's Prix Boréal, and the Grand Prix de la science-fiction et du fantastique québécois. At the time, Claude Janelle asserted in *L'année de la science-fiction et du fantastique québécois 1989* that "Il s'agit certainement du projet le plus ambitieux de l'histoire de la SF québécoise et qui *pourrait* devenir, au terme de l'entreprise, un véritable monument" (41; emphasis added).¹ A decade after the publication of the series' last volume in 1997, this essay examines the question implied in Janelle's use of the conditional: has *L'oiseau de feu* realized the potential that critics saw in it when it first appeared?

On the one hand, its author has been canonized by Québec's science-fiction and fantasy community with the recent renaming of the Grand Prix de la Science-fiction et du fantastique québécois as the Prix Jacques Brossard. Academic and literary critic Michel Lord describes Brossard as one of five "incontournables" writers of science fiction in Québec (with Daniel Sernine, Esther Rochon, Élisabeth Vonarburg, and Jean-Pierre April) ("Feu roulant" 159). *Les années d'apprentissage* figures among the top ten works of French-Canadian science-fiction, according to Jean-Louis Trudel, a central figure in Québec's science-fiction community ("Re: Oiseau de feu"). On the other hand, as we shall see, even within that small community, few read beyond the series' first volume. As a result, Brossard's five-volume trilogy (1, 2A, 2B, 2C, 3) stands today at

the margins of the field both for readers of genre literature in French, and for scholars, an assertion confirmed by an informal poll of the SFQ milieu and by bibliographical investigations.² It is my contention that the work's ludic irreverence toward and self-conscious play with generic conventions — one of its many “postmodern” features — worked against its long-term engagement of Québécois/French-Canadian critics in both the mainstream and the genre milieux. And yet, this “monument aux marges” merits greater attention from academics and general readers alike precisely because of its postmodernism. Before engaging in a detailed analysis of the critical reception of *L'oiseau de feu* and its postmodern elements, a brief introduction to Brossard's oeuvre may be useful given this marginal position.

Jacques-Edmond Brossard, born in 1933, pursued a career in the law, serving as a diplomat, jurist and professor at the Université de Montréal. It is possible that he remains better known for his juridical and political writings, and their role in the dream of a sovereign Québec in the 1970s Commissioned by the provincial assembly, works than for his creative writing like the recently re-edited *L'accession à la souveraineté et le cas du Québec* (1976, 1995) and *L'immigration. Les droits et pouvoirs du Canada et du Québec* (1967) explored Québec's status in international law and proposed appropriate mechanisms for its potential accession to sovereignty.

In tandem with this already active career, Brossard established a literary reputation during the mid-1970s with several works published in *Écrits du Canada français* (1973 and 1978), a collection of short stories, *Le métamorphaux* (1974, 1988), and a novel, *Le sang du souvenir* (1976). His name figures in nearly all of Québec's reference works on literature and literary figures, and most literary histories include some mention of his work. While some have classified him, like David Ketterer, as a “mainstream dabbler” (131), others, like Laurent Mailhot (275, 278) and Michel Lord (“Architectures”), situate him clearly with writers of science fiction and fantasy. Indeed, during the counter-culture period of the late 1960s and early 1970s Québec's literary avant-garde participated in a moment of great experimentation with form and genre making it often difficult to classify their work. Some historians of science fiction and fantasy, like Jean-Marc Gouanvic (“Passé” 76), have annexed idiosyncratic works like Jacques Benoit's *Jos Carbone* (1967) and Emmanuel Cocke's *L'emmanuscrit de la mère morte* (1972) into the corpus of SFQ,

while other critics, like Sophie Beaulé, make clear that works like these simply participate in the so-called mainstream's appropriation of science-fiction tropes as part of a larger project of experimentation. The unanswered question of where Brossard's work fits — in the “slipstream,” as Bruce Sterling has labelled the latter category, or in the corpus of SFQ proper — weighed heavily in critics' judgments of *L'oiseau de feu*.

Clearly, Jacques Brossard's fiction appears marginal even among marginals. Belonging to a generation prior to that of its founders, the jurist has never been an active participant in Québec's cohesive science-fiction movement, although he has expressed his appreciation for the genre of science fiction and its contribution to contemporary literature (Pomerleau and Sernine 20). On the other hand, he states that “en écrivant *L'oiseau de feu*, je n'ai pas cherché du tout à écrire un roman de SF; il s'agit plutôt d'un roman initiatique . . . dont le décor . . . relève de la SF” (Grégoire, “Merveilleuse” 62). Yet, neither has he been canonized as part of the mainstream as have his contemporaries whose works reflect similar themes and stylistic devices. While a large body of academic criticism has been dedicated to the work of writers such as Claude Jasmin, Hubert Aquin and Gérard Bessette, little or no such analysis exists for Brossard's corpus.

Experimentation with generic codes represents the one unifying hallmark of Brossard's oeuvre, as well as a defining trait of a so-called postmodern aesthetic (Suleiman 191). His stories published in *Écrits du Canada français* reflect elements of a magical realism found in the works of earlier South American writers (Borges, Cortázar) or Italian writers of his own generation (Buzzati, Calvino). In texts such as “La grande roue” and “La cloison de verre,” an apparently mimetic universe gradually dissolves into the absurd or the fantastic. This early work also includes some texts of a rather philosophical science fiction such as “Le boulon d'Ernest,” which recalls the theme of Karel Capek's *R.U.R.* (1920) and of many SF classics like Isaac Asimov's *I, Robot* (1950): that of the robot's problematization of definitions of humanity. One of Brossard's short narratives, “Retours,” is a brilliant national allegory in the style of François Barcelo (of *La tribu*, 1980) *avant la lettre*. The texts collected in the highly acclaimed *Le métamorphaux* (1974) include works that are openly science-fictional like “La tentative,” a story of time travel, and “Le souffleur de bulles,” which elaborates the invention of the “self-thought home.” Others are more problematic in their relation-

ship to genre, however. H. P. Lovecraft clearly influences the very early work, “Le cristal de mer,” while Franz Kafka, as well as Japanese writer Akutogawa Ryunosoke’s “Within a Grove” (1921) come to mind upon reading the title story translated as “The Metamorfalsis,” which depicts the testimony of twelve witnesses at a trial whose versions of the events in question become increasingly disparate as the narrative progresses. His “novel,” in scare quotes to indicate its lack of relationship to the traditional realist novel, draws perhaps from the French *nouveau roman*, but even more from the Surrealism of André Breton’s *L’amour fou* (1937) or the paranoia of William S. Burroughs’s *Naked Lunch* (1959). For, rather than an integrated narrative, Brossard’s *Le sang du souvenir* (1976) presents a series of linked vignettes which centre upon one protagonist, “Jean B.,” whose life is composed of bizarre, implausible events. Jean’s love for his wife (also his cousin) remains a consistent thread in a life which culminates in the murder of his best friend, whom he believes has been sent to kill him (both have become secret agents). In the use of fictional place names (Sebitna and Kitnagem), which mirror actual geographic locations (Antibes and Megantic), Brossard employs a technique that will recur in *L’oiseau de feu*. Indeed, he announced his forthcoming “roman de science-fiction” in a bibliographical note in *Le sang du souvenir* (4).

Given the critical interest in his earlier works of fiction, the literary community was waiting, pen-in-hand, when the first volume, *L’oiseau de feu-1. Les années d’apprentissage*, finally appeared thirteen years after this announcement.³ Perhaps this unlucky number contributed to readers’ eventual responses to the series. Upon its initial release, however, reviews appeared in periodicals of such general interest as the province’s dailies, *Le soleil* and *La presse*, in literary reviews, and, of course, in the specialized magazines *imagine...* and *Solaris*. The praise heaped on this first volume appears overwhelming, as a wide range of critics qualified it as follows:

Déjà, dans *Le Sang du souvenir*, on présentait le Grand Oeuvre. Et c’est le premier tome d’une série de cinq qui nous ouvre à la voie “royale” d’une écriture (Imbert 225);

l’ouvrage est magnifique tant du point de vue matériel que du point de vue de sa forme et de son contenu, et c’est à contrecœur que j’ai dû interrompre ma lecture . . . [il] se laisse dévorer et on en redemande (Lord, “Feu d’artifices” 28);

une oeuvre que l'on peut d'ores et déjà qualifier de marquante dans la littérature d'imagination québécoise (Grégoire, "Merveilleuse" 62);

cette décennie sera profondément marquée par . . . Jacques Brossard avec *L'oiseau de feu* (Pouliot);

voilà certainement le livre de SF québécois à l'écriture la plus travaillée, la plus belle, depuis un an sinon deux (Pomerleau);

une oeuvre qui a l'exigence de celles de Jacques Ferron et d'Hubert Aquin . . . et qui peut se comparer à de grandes fresques romanesques telles *Dune* de Frank Herbert ou *Le Seigneur des anneaux* de Tolkien (Royer);

one of the more remarkable books in French-Canadian letters (Trudel, Rev. 13).

In spite of this brilliant début, the snail's pace of the publication of subsequent volumes, which stretched out over the next eight years and was due in part to Brossard's intervening cardiac problems, seems to have slowly eaten away at the public's interest in the project, with the result that there exists almost no published opinion on the work as an ensemble. The general press only expressed interest in the first volume, as did the literary mainstream's critical apparatus, with the notable exception of Claude Grégoire's favourable response to four of the five books in *Québec français*. The elegies of Michel Lord and Claude Janelle for the first three volumes appeared in *Lettres québécoises* under the rubric "Science-fiction et fantasy," so I classify them with reviews by critics in the specialized press. Even the latter does not appear to have responded to the entire series; *Solaris* stopped at the fourth volume, although it marked the occasion with an impressive homage to Brossard by René Beaulieu in addition to a standard-length review. Its competitor *imagine...* stopped paying attention to the work with *La presse* — after the first volume. Well before, then, the publication of its final tome, *L'oiseau de feu* had already been relegated to the back shelf, if it made it that far, as its modest sales confirm.⁴ The complexity and heterogeneity of the work appear as obvious first obstacles to a positive reception for the entire series. Both of these features relate to a preponderance of postmodern elements identifiable in *L'oiseau de feu*, which have served to distance readers and critics alike from a work that has earned the (albeit marginal) status as a monument in Québécois letters.

How, precisely, does Jacques Brossard's *L'oiseau de feu* reflect a post-modern aesthetic? It does so in its violation and self-conscious play with genre conventions (Suleiman 191; Paterson 21-22), its violation of the boundaries of the text itself through its intertextuality and its refusal of narrative closure/textual immanence (Modleski 698; Paterson 21-23). Other traits it shares with the so-called postmodern include its tendency to point out its own fictionality in order to reveal the constructed nature of reality, an element inherent in its use of the trope of the simulacrum (Baudrillard), as well as its treatment of time, not as a linear, diachronic, progress, but rather as a synchronous or spiral form (Jameson 87-89).

The more than 2500 pages of text and paratextual apparatus allow Brossard to play with a number of literary forms and to transgress the boundaries of the text itself. Through the course of its five volumes, *L'oiseau de feu* links itself to the German *Bildungsroman*, the classic utopia, Golden Age pulp SF, the dystopia typical of post-Quiet-Revolution Québec SF,⁵ uchronia/secret history, and even Biblical allegory. As the title of the first volume, *Les années d'apprentissage*, suggests, the series follows the initiation, apprenticeship, and development of a central figure, Adakhan Demuthsen. Brossard situates his work within a German tradition of the "roman initiatique" not only in interviews (Grégoire, "Merveilleuse" 62; Pomerleau and Sernine 19), but also with epigraphic citations from Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* (AA vii),⁶ Kleist, Novalis, and Hesse's *Magister Ludi/The Glass Bead Game* (RA 223) among others. With a significant portion of the final volume titled "Die Zauberinsel," he pays homage to Thomas Mann (AE 117-70). Unlike the German tradition, which intends to reflect mimetically the real world of the reader, however distorted the reflection might appear through the lens of romanticism, Brossard sets his hero's development in a fictional universe, which stands in an ambivalent relationship to our own. While various "clues" lead the reader to deduce that the world of Manokhsor and La Centrale stands for Earth in a post-apocalyptic future, a parallel set of data establishes another planet, Ashmev, as a figure of our home planet (AE 75-95).⁷ This apparent internal contradiction is not simply the result of poor editing. Rather, it represents a wilful resistance to narrative closure associated with the postmodern, as well as the type of purposeful mystification of the reader aligned with the genre of found literature (a relationship to be discussed shortly).

Heroic fantasy can be seen as a popular genre manifestation of the *Bildungsroman*, and *Les années d'apprentissage* shares with that form the pseudo-medieval setting of the walled city of Manokhsor and the theme of its central character's development through apprenticeship and initiation into an elite society. An array of features, however, begins to link Brossard's novel to science fiction from as early as a fictional editor's preface dated "2975" (AA 8). From the novel's inception, the habitual reader of science fiction suspects that Manokhsor's apparently medieval society, surrounded by a vast, empty desert, exists either on another planet or on a post-apocalyptic future Earth. The total surveillance operated upon this society suggests a more sophisticated technology than that possessed by average Périphériens (as the citizens of Manokhsor are called). Similarly, sporadic citations from an "*Encyclopedia Centralis*," which explain its various activities and institutions in a voice distanced from those it describes, imply its observation by a more "advanced" group (AA 46, 123, 349). Italicized excerpts of conversations about the events, recounted both in the third-person narrative and in Adakhan's journal, clearly reveal that the Périphériens of Manokhsor are, indeed, being watched and manipulated by others, some benevolent, some malevolent (AA 65, 157, 325 and *passim*). The three volumes of part two fully explain these figures' presence in Manokhsor and their own lives in the futuristic, underground society of the Centrale.

From the heroic fantasy/*Bildungsroman* atmosphere of the first part of his trilogy, Brossard moves the reader clearly into the realm of science fiction in the second part. *L'oiseau de feu-2A. Le recyclage d'Adakhan* (1990) focuses, as its subtitle suggests, on Adakhan's recovery and re-education into this underground community of scientists. Here he learns that both Centraliens and Périphériens represent the descendants of survivors of a great catastrophe on Earth which occurred in the year "2793 AC — notre année zéro" (GP 114), the AC in the date referring to "*L'Avant-Centrale, l'Avant-Catastrophe ou l'époque de l'Ancien Calendrier*" (RA 167). A group of some thousand scientists, seeking shelter from the coming cataclysm, had built the Centrale under the "*désert de Gobb*" (RA 172).

As we shall see in a later discussion of the work's reception, certain critics have interrogated the relationship of *L'oiseau de feu* to the genre of science fiction, yet there is no question that Brossard exploits its tropes.

From its setting on what is apparently a post-apocalyptic Earth (AA), to the futuristic, high-tech society of the underground Centrale (RA, GP, SQP), to its depiction of a rocket ship's crew blasting off from one planet to colonize another (GP, SQP, AE), the novel is steeped in the conventions not only of science fiction but of a wide range of science fictions. In the vein of "hard" SF,⁸ it speculates on various forms of space travel and the problems associated with them, including the time involved (GP 89-94), the possibility of leaps within space/time and other problems of propulsion (GP 57-60; SQP 361, 375), the fabrication of heat resistant metals (SQP 52), and the teleportation of matter (GP 99, SQP 43-47). In the vein of a "soft" or psychological SF, it explores the impact of such things as the programmed conditioning of a population (SQP 19, 68), remote behavioural control through negative reinforcement (AA 20 and *passim*), and the effects of mental telepathy (AE 215). Finally, it represents a socially conscious SF as its critical depiction of the societies of Manokhsor (AA 71, 301 and *passim*; RA 421-22), the Centrale, and even the newly born civilization on Ashmev are meant to reflect and comment, of course, upon conditions of oppression and *conditionnement*⁹ prevalent in our own world.

As with the novel of initiation, Brossard overtly connects his work to the genre of SF through a number of intertextual references, including its dedication to Jules Verne (AA vii). Epigraphic citations link it to such works and writers central to and on the margins of science fiction and fantasy as Gene Wolfe (AA 467), Jorge Luis Borges (AA 87, 293), Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's *L'Ève future* (SQP 7), Ernst Jünger (AE ix-x; GP vii, 145), and Esther Rochon (SQP vii). As Jean-Louis Trudel points out, Adakhan's surname pays homage to French writer of SF, Michel Demuth (Rev. 13-14). In Syrius Le Vieux's library, Adakhan discovers a number of "romans ou des chroniques d'Essef-Esoth" (SF and esoterica; RA 306), their authors and titles veiled through a deformed orthography, suggestive of language's evolution over time:

Les deux créations d'Asmoth [Asimov], *La planète creuse* de Jouhl-Broz [a reference to hollow-earth texts], *L'Odyssée 4004* d'Hess-Klahr [an extrapolated *2001: A Space Odyssey?*] . . . , *Nem-Robuhr le Sardar* de Sol-Vherne [Jules Verne's *Robur-le-Conquérant*, 1885] . . . , *Le maître du jeu* d'Her-Mhesse [Hermann Hesse's *Magister ludi*] . . . , *Le K sans cas* de Buz-Borgh [a conflation of Kafka, Borges and Buzatti]. (RA 305-06)

A most striking example of *L'oiseau de feu's* self-conscious exploitation of the intertextual reference appears when a character witnesses a cyborg literally “crack up” in a stressful situation. The character exclaims, “C'est la première fois que j'en vois une se suicider. La 4^e loi d'Asmoth? Se détruire en cas de conflit quand il n'y a pas d'autre solution?” (RA 108), in a limpid reference to Isaac Asimov's fictional Laws of Robotics. Indeed, not only has the team building the rocket consulted existing scientific documents, they also consult works of “esef” (GP 59, 90). When a character asserts that “«La esef d'AC, nous sommes à la réaliser . . . »” (SQP 52), Brossard goes well beyond the numerous other passing references to “esef” (RA 454; SQP 44), revealing clearly the self-reflexive attitude toward genre typical of the postmodern text.

While the initial section of *L'oiseau de feu-3. Les années d'errance*, “La Traversée,” deals with Adakhan's journey through space with the crew of the rocket ship *L'aigle d'or*, the remainder of this final volume skirts the edges of science fiction. On the one hand, the depiction of human survival and redevelopment of civilization after an apocalypse is a commonplace SF trope, especially in SFQ from this period or earlier,¹⁰ and even the prehistory novel has at times been considered a subgenre of SF.¹¹ The bulk of the narrative's conclusion, though, draws upon one of the oldest utopian tropes identified by Frank and Fritzie Manuel: that of the return to Eden (33). *Les années d'errance* represents an allegorical fantasy of Paradise and its loss — until the fifty-some pages of epilogues and explanatory afterwords returns to an SF atmosphere — which may hold little interest for the average reader of SF. In the québécois jurist's version Adakhan (read *Adam*) freely exchanges his magical paradise for knowledge and action. His destiny, with Selvah (read *Eve*), Laitha (*Lilith*) and their children Sed (*Seth*, who is a girl), Abhül (*Abel*) and Khan (*Cain*, but also a possible homage to a recurrent character of that name in the *Star Trek* television and film series), is to populate this planet. Indeed, Brossard's rewriting of the Hebrew Scriptures' *Genesis* may challenge most readers with its repetitive, detailed descriptions of the daily lives, struggles, and, reminiscent of the “begats” of the Biblical Pentateuch, sexual relations of its characters. Here, the utopia slides into yet another subgenre of science fiction, the alternate history, as the Biblical allegory transforms these figures into the ancestors of all humanity.

Brossard's description of this text in an "Avant-propos" as a "chronique inédite d'un large pan de notre histoire commune" (AA x) firmly connects this work to the *uchronie*. Just as the utopia depicts a no-place, the uchronia depicts a no-time, a timeline other than that of the reader, allowing the author to explore elements of secret history or alternate history. Brossard's inclusion of the alternate history/*uchronie* among the wide array of generic forms that he appropriates, because of its relationship to our conception of time and history, reveals a postmodern sensibility that digs much deeper than the exploitation of the superficial, aesthetic practices of intertextuality and self-referentiality. Brossard approaches time itself in a manner that Fredric Jameson identifies as specifically postmodern.

In *Archaeologies of the Future* (2005), Jameson discusses the contemporary transition from a diachronic thought system, which conceives of history as linear and liable to cause and effect, to a synchronic one, which allows for "the multiple coexistence of factors or facts, . . . the conviction that everything is of a piece, that the relations between existences and facts are much stronger than their possible relationship to what is no longer and what is not yet" (89). *L'oiseau de feu* reflects in many ways not only a Jungian synchronicity,¹² but what Jameson views as this positive strategy for dealing with the "proliferation of narratives [which] emerges [and] which raises the terrifying specter of postmodern relativism" (88). Brossard's novel concludes precisely with what might be termed a proliferation of narratives in its suggestion, through its "Annexe" and "Epilogue" (AE 543-56), that Adakhan's story has been simply one of a large number of possible iterations of the same/similar events. Furthermore, its author openly defies a linear/historical vision of time in the fictional "Préface de l'Éditeur" dated "Sebitna 2975": "(Nous savons maintenant que le temps n'existe pas: tout est simultané. Et la 2000^e page rejoint la première — ou presque)" (AA 8). As these and the other paratextual pseudo-documents that frame the narrative sow the seeds of ambiguity, rendering the project's intent as utopia, dystopia, or uchronia impossible to decide in the end,¹³ the text ultimately also succeeds in its postmodern refusal of narrative closure. Its ludic (or cumbersome, as you like) paratextual apparatus attaches *L'oiseau de feu* to yet another genre, that of found literature.

Brossard poses as the *third* translator of a diverse array of documents whose origin is explained in a series of initial "Avant-propos," "Notes

des traducteurs,” and concluding “Postface de l’Éditeur,” “Après-propos,” and even a “Finale.” He thus joins the likes of Théophile Gautier (*La Guzla*, 1827) and James De Mille (*A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder*, 1888) in playing the game of the literary hoax. The wealth of explanatory material, rather than clarifying the origin of the pseudo-documents, which, “translated,” become *L’Oiseau de feu*, works to obscure it further and serves to blur and violate the boundaries of the text. In the “Avant-propos” to the first volume, Brossard indicates that in 1974 he received from his father some dozen black notebooks, written in the nineteenth century by his great-grandfather, Jan Altman (AA ix). Those notebooks contained a translation into Manx of a manuscript in an unknown language signed by a Jussar de Borsacq (an anagram of the author’s name), dated (at the end of the fifth volume) “Laertnom, 2985” (AE 560). A biographical note informs the reader that the linguist and philosopher Borsacq was born in 2933 (one thousand years after Brossard’s birth). Not to be left out of the fun, by the third book (*2B. Le grand projet*) Pierre Filion, Brossard’s editor at Leméac, “a bien voulu jouer le rôle amical et lourd de «4^e traducteur»” (GP ix). The “Préface de l’Éditeur,” of Borsacq’s fictional editor, that is, explains that an international expedition to the Afar desert found the original documents encased in a box of rustproof “héon” and archived them in 1975 at the “bibliothèque du C. N. R. S. de Sirap” (AA 7; note that Sirap inverts to Paris, as does Laertnom to Montréal). These documents, whose “caractère apparemment authentique . . . nous a incité à les publier sous forme de chronique” (AA 7), include narrative text in the third person, extracts from personal journals of several individuals, citations from the *Encyclopedia Centralis*, various computer printouts, and a few maps and diagrams, with translator’s explanatory notes peppered throughout.

The text’s very nature as a heteroclite assortment of “translated” documents aligns it with the forms of parody and pastiche, often associated with the postmodern aesthetic (Hills 164; Hutcheon 72, 97; Siebers 6, 10-11; Paterson 22). Brossard’s work shares with parody the element of imitation, although it is not always clear that it seeks to satirize or mock. It thus follows Linda Hutcheon’s definition of parody as “a form of imitation, but imitation characterized by ironic inversion, not always at the expense of the parodied text” (6). Rather, its imitation documents tend to blur the boundaries between the real and the fictional, creating a *mise en abyme* of the problem of verisimilitude; its parody of computer

files, intimate journals, and encyclopedia entries creates a collage of texts, some of which clearly violate the conventions of narrative forms. For example, volume *2B-Le grand projet* begins with a chapter entitled “Fiches,” which the supposed narrator informs the reader that he has just finished decoding (“décrypter” GP 9). These are “reproduced” as a series of numbers, letters, and other signs, to represent the encoded computer files dating from “l’an 2984 A.C.,” then followed by their “meaning” as rendered by the translator. Elsewhere, the text reproduces various signs (GP 171) and “caractères goltheckh” (RA 312-13), maps (RA 174, AE 104), and diagrams (GP 36, SQP 55). The footnotes from the various “translators” further violate the boundaries of the text, blurring the limits between the real and the fictional, as does the entire invented history of the manuscripts and their various publications, including a pseudo-title page attributing authorship to Jan Altman (AA xi). The author’s afterword, dated Montréal 1996 and thus anchored in real time and the real world, further mystifies the reader. Here Brossard admits that his initial introduction “était authentique sauf en ce qui concerne l’identité de Jan Altman et la présence à Man des cahiers noirs” (AE 583) — an apparent admission of “truth” about his literary hoax. He then tells an alternate story about the origin of the text, stating that these notebooks were rather “écrit par mon père en 1922-1923” and that he found them not long after the latter’s death in 1986 (AE 583). Even here, the author remains disingenuous, piling mystification upon mystification, since by his own admission (Pomerleau and Sernine 18) and that of his editor (Filion 191) Brossard wrote the entire *canevas* for the project in 1975-76. By this point the reader has lost any foothold as to where the fiction ends and reality begins.

The ultimate irony of Brossard’s five-volume saga, with all of its purportedly explanatory paratextual material, is its studied ambiguity, its ultimate denial of narrative closure. Most obviously, the narrative proper (that is, the *Bildungsgroman* of Adakhan’s life) ends on a cliff-hanging moment of suspension. Adakhan has convinced his growing family to leave the island paradise of the *Zauberinsel* for the continent that he wishes to explore and which, in a reconception of manifest destiny, he feels they are destined to populate. The anticipated fratricide (set up by the Biblical allegory) provides a final narrative climax to what we might call the body of the text proper, a body repeatedly violated by elements cited above, but yet distinguishable from the subsequent

epilogues, afterwords, and annexes. With no dénouement to follow it, this climax leaves the reader uncertain as Abhül sees the stone thrown by his brother Khan reflected in the water before him. Could the text's utopian potential be fulfilled? Could Abhül move quickly enough to avoid the stone's blow? Could he have lived, and thus changed human destiny forever?

Here the paratextual material takes over from the narrative. The "3^e traducteur" [Brossard] exhorts the reader to "imaginer la suite de cette chronique inachevée" and suggests that only then "Tu pourras ensuite passer à l'épilogue" (AE 541). Before that epilogue, however, the reader finds yet another pseudo-document, an "Annexe," which begins:

Dans les rognures de Borsacq, je [the third translator?] trouve cet extrait de dialogue entre deux Programmeurs sans retrouver son contexte: « — Alors, cher collègue, c'est encore raté? Vous allez recommencer ailleurs? Voyez cette pierre qui vole et ce crâne qu'elle va fracasser.

— Je croyais que vous aviez compris. Abhül voit venir la pierre. Cela durera aussi longtemps qu'il faudra: nous avons devant nous des centaines de millions d'années-T.

— La 27^e variante? Cela ne vous suffit pas? (AE 543)

Thus culminate the repeated speculations on reality and illusion initiated through the Périphériens' belief in the reality of a world which was simply a scene staged by the Centraliens (AA through SQP), continuing through the repeated holodeck training simulations for the crew of the *Aigle d'or* prior to lift off (GP, SQP), and carried on by its survivors on Ashmev (AE). Indeed, one of these holosimulations reproduces a scene which (later in the novel) actually occurs in the lives of Adakhan, Selvah, and Laïtha on Ashmev. So, Adakhan's quest for truth and meaning spanning three different lives (in Manokshor, in the Centrale, and on Ashmev), is now revealed in the space of a few pages to all have been a simulation engineered by these "Programmeurs." Later, this conversation reveals the identity of its interlocutors: "VH" and "FR5," codes for Sirius le Vieux (YWVH) and his nemesis, Lokhfer (Lucifer).

As if the point has not been made clearly enough, an "Epilogue" confirms the notion of an endless cycle of repetition (albeit with the purpose of the higher development of the individuals involved) discussed throughout earlier philosophical dialogues between Sirius and Adakhan, as well as in the conversation of the "Annexe." Calling on

the SF trope of the parallel universe, it presents an alternate version of the novel's prologue. There, Adakhan's initial "fugue" as a seven-year-old boy — the beginning of his quest for greater knowledge and the truth about his world — reveals to him that the "Jungle" outside Manokhsor is actually a desert and that at least one animal, a lizard, has survived the holocaust (AA 13-22). In the epilogue, a seven-year-old girl, protected by a mysterious Marraine (the counterpart to Adakhan's Parrain), discovers that the "Désert" outside her more technologically developed but Manokhsor-like city is, indeed, a great, green Park (AE 547-556), effectively reversing — as in a mirror image — the elements of Adakhan's universe.

In addition to reinforcing the synchronic conception of time that Jameson suggests as a positive strategy for dealing with the postmodern proliferation of narratives, these pieces confirm the relationship of Brossard's work to that of another thinker essential to the development of postmodern theory, Jean Baudrillard. In the fully synthesized world of Adakhan, individuals and their perceptions are manipulated both in Manokhsor and in the Centrale by various processes of brainwashing, negative reinforcement, and pure force. Not only do other individuals at the periphery of these societies (the *dirigeants*, who prove to be Centraliens posing as Périphérien leaders) create the illusion of a reality; if we accept the Annexe's proposal of Syrius and Lokhfer as figures of God and Lucifer, then these quasi-divine Programmeurs have created it whole cloth from the outside. This situation recalls precisely the postmodern world described in Baudrillard's *Simulations* (1983): "The real is produced from miniaturised units, from matrices, memory banks and command models" (3). To clarify, Baudrillard explains how the world of representation differs from that of simulation: "Whereas representation tries to absorb simulation by interpreting it as false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation as itself a simulacrum" (11). Likewise, Brossard reveals the fictional universe of *L'oiseau de feu* ultimately to be merely a series of simulations, each hidden within another like a set of Russian *matryoshka* dolls. And the narrative unfolds self-consciously, as Adakhan and other characters repeatedly wonder if the world they are experiencing is real or a dream (AA 19, 443) or a vast holosimulation (AE 105). The reader's efforts, then, to assign a representational meaning to either Ashmev or the world of the Centrale/Manokhsor as figures for "Earth" become pointless. The

simulation represents not an ultimate reality or truth but simply another representation. *L'oiseau de feu*, like Baudrillard's simulation, "is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (2). Baudrillard's metaphor for it, "*The desert of the real itself*" (2), uncannily recalls the post-apocalyptic desert which encircles Manokhsor, a desert which the oppressed people are told is a jungle.

Having outlined the postmodern elements of Brossard's experimental hybrid text, I would like now to return to critical responses to *L'oiseau de feu*. It is my contention that these very postmodern elements, particularly the tendency to violate generic conventions and/or to blur the boundaries between genres, alienated and distanced critics from this work. For the patient and attentive reader, Adakhan's world and his creator's cognitive game-playing can certainly invoke the sense of wonder and fascination associated with "good" literature, science fiction and mainstream alike. It is not, however, on the attractive aspects of Brossard's work that I plan to linger now, but rather on its blemishes, flaws already noticed by critics of its first volume which provide clues to its current forgotten state. Michel Lord, with the publication of volume 2A, asked the question that subtends this essay's inquiry: "est-ce parce que l'entreprise apparaît trop complexe ou parce que le code SF se dévoile de manière patente que la critique est demeurée pratiquement muette pour ce tome alors qu'elle n'avait été qu'éloge pour le premier?" ("Au creux" 36).

Let us begin with the issue of complexity, which englobes several issues raised by the text's critics: the paratext, its repetitiousness, and its length. Faced with the elaborate paratext, critics did not know how to interpret it; several asked, as did Jean-Pierre April, if Brossard's mystifications represented a postmodern ludism or an outmoded puerility. In relation to the problem of repetition at both the stylistic and narrative levels, the same ambivalence appears. Several critics discuss the "baroque" aspects of the text, apparently a euphemism for its dense, flowery, often grotesque prose. If Claude Janelle refers to Brossard's practice of piling adjective upon adjective as a desired "surcharge" (*ASFFQ* 1989 42), the several comparisons with Flaubert's *Salammbô* and the nineteenth-century *romans-fleuve* of Eugène Sue can be read ambivalently (Basile; Janelle, *ASFFQ* 1989 42-43; Lord, "Feu d'artifices" 28). Jean Basile accuses Brossard of having "relâché" a style which was "si châtié dans ses textes brefs." René Beaulieu's homage to the work, which

appeared in *Solaris* after the completion of the fourth volume, gives a foretaste of Brossard's own "overdetermined" style: "un des ouvrages les plus beaux, les plus amples, les plus luxurieusement foisonnants, les plus ambitieux et les plus importants que notre genre ait produit au Québec" (31). Furthermore, it is unclear whether or not the various repetitions of plot elements throughout the text are a necessary device to remind the reader of events that occurred in previous volumes (or earlier in the same volume, even) or if they are simply the result of a relaxed editorial attitude.

Seeking to defend *L'oiseau de feu* from an unpublished, but implied, criticism from the SF and F community in Québec, Fabien Ménard's review of the third book in *Solaris* reveals these flaws relative to its length: "Ne soyons toutefois pas étonnés si certains y trouvent à redire. J'entends d'ici leurs réserves: dialogues qui n'en finissent pas, passages pâteux et raisonneurs qui alourdissent le fil de la lecture, propos humanistes lassants, et patati, et patata." At the same time, he is forced to admit that the volume in question, *Le grand projet*, begins with a dialogue one hundred pages long. Michel Lord speaks politely of its "«fluvialité»" ("Feu d'artifices" 28), while Jean Basile, frankly, finds "les longueurs les plus plates" already in the first book. Yet, Luc Pomerleau concludes that this length adds to the verisimilitude of the text, as the vicissitudes of Adakhan's life play out almost in real time for the reader!

Corollary to this issue, lengthy delays between the series' conception and composition and its eventual publication pose a problem for the critics. Jean-Pierre April evokes his reaction when faced with the first volume as being in the presence of something sublime — awesome and terrifying at the same time. He asks himself: "Le pauvre lecteur que je suis serait-il victime de «l'effet cathédrale»? Tiendra-t-il le coup pendant les 2000 pages qui s'annoncent, tiendra-t-il le coût des 150\$ pour les cinq livres?" (88). Although several critics of subsequent volumes praise Brossard's capacity to maintain narrative suspense, keeping the reader waiting eagerly for the next volume's appearance (April 90; Janelle, *ASFFQ* 1989 43; Lord, "Feu d'artifices" 28; Trudel, Rev. 14), it is clear that very few held out to the very end. More than one of the critics most vocal in the assertion that this work truly represents a monument of science fiction and/or of Québec letters has admitted *not* having finished the entire series.¹⁴

Another potential flaw, also relative to the problems of time and the

delays in production, lies in the tone of Brossard's utopian epic. Fabien Ménard, in his review of volume 2.C, *Le sauve-qui-peut*, attributes the lack of understanding of this work, whose essential message is that of love for humanity, to the cynicism of his own contemporaries who guffaw at the very term love (46). René Beaulieu also classifies the work as a moral saga and his description captures precisely the ambivalence of the work's overall tone, which reflects a hopeful humanism, set in contrast with the work's ultimately sardonic conclusion: "l'appel d'un grand artiste . . . pas encore tout à fait désillusionné, à l'espoir et au désespoir également élégants" (33). For while the redemptive force of love is certainly a theme of the work, its conclusion — albeit hidden and perhaps hedged in the several pages of the "Epilogue" and "Addendum" — reflects, as I have argued here, a postmodern approach to the illusory nature of any so-called truth or reality. Ménard's comment is highly pertinent, though, in that it signals a gap of almost a generation between the conception of Brossard's work and its publication, as Jean-Louis Trudel has also noted ("Re: merci"). Indeed, several critics comment on the author's reputation being established with his first works in the early 1970s, a period of general experimentation in Québec's literature, during which critics expected hybrid and experimental texts, and the theme of love as a liberating force was almost a commonplace (Arguin 244). As mentioned earlier, Brossard drafted a plan for the entire project during a 1975 trip to Antibes (the "Sebitna" of the text) (Filion 190), yet the project was not published in its entirety until almost twenty years later, twenty years that witnessed radical changes in Québec's society.

But it is the genre of Brossard's monumental opus that seems to be the most problematic for its critics, a problem to be expected based on the preceding analysis of the author's postmodern approach to generic conventions. For the general press — which, by the way, often reveals its disdain for and misunderstanding of literature's imaginative genres — *Loiseau de feu* sins precisely because it belongs to the realm of "paraliterature." In spite of Jean Royer's conclusion, in *Le devoir*, that "la science-fiction devient littérature" in Brossard's work, this branch of literary criticism appears to have concluded largely with Anne-Marie Voisard of *Le soleil* that only those who like the "fantastique"¹⁵ [*sic*] will continue reading past the first volume of the series. Jean Basile equivocally pronounces, "Pour aimer ce livre inégal, où l'on trouve rassemblés

les pires ponctifs du genre . . . il faut jouer le jeu du savant et prolix romancier et se laisser faire. Alors on entre dans un univers enchanté.”

Critics from the specialized press reveal themselves more willing to enter into Brossard's game, but the problem of identifying the genre of this text represents for them something like the Sphinx's riddle. Luc Pomerleau describes the text's first volume as employing a fantasy setting marked with SF topoi, a comment usually reserved for mainstream works that exploit SF tropes. He asserts, however, that unlike other mainstream writers who have strayed into the world of science fiction (he uses the example of Margaret Atwood), Brossard's SF succeeds precisely because it “prolonge et dépasse ce qui a précédé dans le genre.” Claude Janelle, in the title of his review, forcefully describes *L'oiseau de feu* as “La science-fiction totale”; yet in the body he qualifies the work as “la synthèse des sous-genres . . . : l'utopie, l'opéra galactique, la *hard* SF, la dystopie . . .” (“Science-fiction” 30). Tellingly, he ends this list, also the final sentence of his review, with an ellipsis.

With Janelle, Grégoire (Rev. of *Grand projet* 20), Imbert, and Lord (“Au creux” 35) all mention the series's relationship to utopia and its darker sister, dystopia (Lord, “Feu d'artifices” 28, 29). Janelle's earlier review of *Le recyclage d'Adakhan* rightly asserts that this volume's description of the Centrale begins by describing a society that is “eutopique,” the exact term for a better society (as opposed to More's utopia, which refers neutrally to a “not-place”), but that, “Peu à peu cette société eutopique révèle des aspects moins édifiants qui associent la Centrale à une eutopie dégénérée ou instable et orientent finalement le récit vers une dystopie” (*ASFFQ* 1990 40). The most appropriate term for Brossard's work may be the “critical dystopia,” described by Tom Moylan, based on the work of Raffaella Baccolini (188-89). This open-ended form contrasts with the classic literary utopia, which describes a static, usually eutopian society, or even the anti-utopia (which critiques the notion that a eutopia can be created) and the dystopia (which depicts a society worse than the reader's, usually, however, with the agenda of generating a utopian critique that would lead toward correction of the problems identified). The critical dystopia, like *L'oiseau de feu*, rejects “the conservative dystopian tendency to settle for the anti-utopian closure . . . by setting up ‘open endings’ that resist that closure and maintain the ‘utopian impulse *within* the work’” (Baccolini 18, qtd. in Moylan 189). For, in spite of its apparently downbeat conclusion that Adakhan

and the rest of humanity exist in an endless, computer-generated loop of pseudo-reality engineered by god-like “Programmeurs” locked in a manichean struggle, *L’oiseau de feu*’s indeterminability, its refusal to conclude conclusively as it winds down in a series of self-contradictory afterwords by its various editors and translators, sets up precisely this type of open-endedness, allowing the utopian hope for personal development and for a better society that fills Adakhan’s personal journals and his reported conversations with idealists Syrius and Selvah to leave their mark on the reader’s psyche.

Michel Lord also links Brossard’s work to the literary mainstream, asserting that its high quality precludes a definition as “paralittérature”; indeed, Lord rightly argues that it demonstrates how “les (dé)classements a priori . . . peuvent être inopérants et fallacieux” (“Feu d’artifices” 28). He attempts nonetheless to make such a classification, proposing that “L’oeuvre serait une sorte d’hybride de la science-fiction, alliant la *fantasy* ... et la dystopie” (“Feu d’artifices” 29). Indeed, Brossard himself comes to the same conclusion in his own significant “Après-propos” (AE 583-87). Perhaps his final word on the series, Brossard’s afterword bears a lengthy citation as it addresses a number of the issues taken up here, enumerating “quelques obstacles” that the author himself anticipated to the positive reception of this work:

- (1) L’époque (le vide néo-libéral) et notre milieu limité;
- (2) le genre de ce roman — ou plutôt: la fusion *hybride* de deux «genres» que j’aime: le roman initiatique de tradition germanique et/ou romantique *et* la science-fiction littéraire reliée au socio-politique [SF] — laquelle SF est une des deux formes *contemporaines* de la littérature. Mais *l’étiquette* «SF» (Science Fiction/Spéculative Fiction) risquait de faire s’enfuir les attardés qui ne savent pas encore que la SF peut appartenir à la littérature;
- (3) l’évolution interne de la chronique (le tome 3 diffère du tome 2 qui diffère du tome 1);
- (4) la longueur de l’entreprise (bien qu’elle fasse partie du projet même);
- (5) son contenu «idéologique» . . . (AE 584-85)

This level of self-awareness bears witness to the purpose and intent behind the elements which elicited the dissatisfaction of various critics.

For, ultimately, Brossard’s “monument . . . à la littérature

d'imagination" (Grégoire, Rev. of *Recyclage*) errs for the literary mainstream because it is *too* science fictional and for genre critics because it is *not enough*. René Beaulieu effectively qualifies it as "trop différent, trop hors normes, inclassable et irréductible à la respectabilité, aux bonnes moeurs et aux vieilles catégories figées rancies et bien assurantes" (32). Academic critics can cite Thomas Adorno's dictum that "Probably no important artwork ever corresponded completely to its genre" (262) until they are blue in the face; not only the general public but also many literary critics desire a given text to fulfill their preconceptions in relation to genre. In the case of a text as complex as *L'oiseau de feu*, which has incited such an overwhelmingly ambivalent reaction (glowing praise tempered with awed bafflement at somewhat staggering obstacles to its commercial publication), it is tempting to concur with André Carpentier's assertion (in another context) that

La SF est devenue si complexe, par ses formes et ses contenus, par son histoire, par ses tendances à la catégorisation, par ses rapports au reste de la littérature et aux discours sociaux, qu'elle exige idéalement une compétence de réception à laquelle seulement quelques «spécialistes» . . . peuvent aspirer. ("Aspects" 21)

This sentiment finds a bizarre echo in recent comments addressed to me by Joël Champetier, current general editor of *Solaris*, about Brossard's epic work: "C'est une oeuvre érudite et surcompliquée. Il est fort possible que ce soit les chercheurs dans ton genre qui en constituent le meilleur public." Even Jean-Louis Trudel, one of SF's most erudite critics, describes the work's second and third volumes as having interest only for their historical or critical value ("Re: Oiseau de feu").

Whose opinion do we accept? Should we read only the first volume and forget the rest, as several critics seem to suggest? Or must we, as its author and a handful of critics and readers assert, resist judging *L'oiseau de feu* until we can consider the entire work as a whole? Obviously, I argue in favour of the latter strategy and offer here a re-evaluation of a body of criticism that is generally ambivalent — since for each trait criticized another reader finds reason to praise — and that ultimately fails to take into account the entirety of a work that must, as its author exhorts, be taken as a whole. Clearly, the flaws detected by critics in Brossard's marginal monument must, for the most part, be seen as existent; they are not, however, irremediable. These problematic elements include 1) an excessive delay in the series' publication; 2) its publication in a liter-

ary series, beyond the means of a large part of its potential audience; 3) a lack of marketing to this same potential audience (in particular, readers of specialized literature who would, more readily, engage with the text); 4) an excessive generosity on the part of its literary director who might have required cuts to eliminate some stylistic and narrative repetition; and 5) its doubly marginalized position, at the fringe of the mainstream yet not at the core of SFQ and its readership. For, I must admit there were moments in my own reading that I wondered how this work was ever published, particularly given the length of some of the philosophical passages — not because of its lack of literary merit, but more because of my own generic expectations for the story to move along, as well as a certain awareness of the market realities of both literary and science-fiction publishing. At the same time, however, I wondered what might have been the fate of Brossard's *Oiseau de feu* if, like Élisabeth Vonarburg's *Tyranaël* pentalogy (Éditions Alire, 1996-97), which reached Québec's best-seller list (Boisvert), it had been published over a short period of time, by a publisher specializing in genre literature and offered at a moderate price?

For the series holds true merit for the reader who turns to SF not for escapist adventure stories in space but for real “speculative fiction,” and many of these qualities were also mentioned by critics who took the time to read the work, even if only in part: 1) the charm of Adakhan Demuthsen as a protagonist with whom many might identify; 2) the richness of the universe of Manokhsor, the Centrale and the planet Ashmev created by Brossard; 3) the scenes of real action, found for example in Adakhan's physical and mental battles with the forces of order, or in the bizarre rituals of Manokhsor and the leisure activities of the Centraliens; 4) the suspense of Adakhan's quest to understand his world and his place in it, a quest renewed with his passage from each world to the next; and 5) the game in which Brossard engages the reader to solve the enigmas of his universe's relationship to our own. Clearly, the complexity and the high literary quality of this text call for studies by specialists working not only in the field of science fiction and fantasy, but also by critics of literature in general.

The analysis of *L'oiseau de feu's* postmodern elements presented here begins only to scratch the surface of a rich and complex text ripe for academic study. Further development remains to be done on its intertextuality, its ludism, its fragmentation at the levels of the narration and

of the construction of its characters' identity, all aspects often identified with the postmodern. Similarly, a systematic study of this text's place in the genre of found literature, as well as its relationship to established categories of genre, such as SF, utopia, heroic fantasy, and others should be undertaken. Additional studies might address the text's linguistic games, found both in the extrapolated computer language and the Centrale's continued use of expressions contemporary to the reader, but rendered in a phonetic French spelling,¹⁶ its potential socio-political allegories and the interface with Brossard's non-fiction writing, as well as its expression of eschatological myth in its portrayal of Adakhan and his family as the Biblical Adam.

In an overview of French-Canadian SF in the 1980s, Jean-Marc Gouanvic, without being able to take into account Brossard's work, which had barely appeared in print, proposes a description of the genre and its effects which could be, nonetheless, applied to *L'oiseau de feu*:

la science-fiction optimale est celle qui parvient à construire des univers radicalement autres sans fausse note ni timidité. Les meilleurs récits de SF sont . . . ceux qui s'installent d'emblée dans l'imagination de l'altérité, *in medias res*, en sachant maintenir leur cohérence imaginaire sans solution de continuité. L'effet sur le lecteur est alors considérable: ces récits suscitent un plaisir de lecture d'une rare qualité, à la fois plaisir des sens mais aussi plaisir de l'intelligence, car un récit d'altérité s'apparente fortement à une rupture épistémologique. Il produit sur le psychisme un effet de décentrement et entraîne une réévaluation profonde des schèmes de pensée. ("Figures" 30)

This is precisely the effect that Brossard's "monument aux marges" had on me, as well as on several of Québec's most respected critics of SF and F like Michel Lord, Claude Janelle, René Beaulieu, Luc Pomerleau, and Jean Pettigrew. Ultimately, I concur with the only published review of its final volume. In *L'année de la science-fiction et du fantastique québécois 1997* Jean Pettigrew provides an unequivocal response to Claude Janelle's conditional assertion in the same publication some eight years earlier, that, indeed, Jacques Brossard's *Oiseau de feu* had fulfilled all of the potential critics saw in it, and that it represented "sans l'ombre d'un doute, . . . l'une des oeuvres les plus puissantes que la littérature québécoise, tout genre confondu, nous ait donnée depuis son éclosion. . . . Un grand livre, qui ne saura être comparé à nul autre tant il est dans

une classe à part!” (45, 47). Brossard’s epic, although it may stand on the margins, remains a monumental work that cannot, should not, be ignored by writers or scholars, not only of SFQ, but of international SF, as well as of Québec letters. Having answered one question, though, I will conclude with another. Can *L’oiseau de feu* rise from the cinders to be reborn as a classic, or will the spark ignited with the publication of *Les années d’apprentissage* simply fade with the extinction of its last embers? Clearly, a re-edition in French and a translation into English would be necessary to make the work physically accessible to a wider audience. It is to be hoped that these, as well as the academic projects mentioned earlier, will be undertaken and that a new generation will fan the flames of interest in Jacques Brossard’s epic work.

AUTHOR’S NOTE

Portions of this analysis were delivered in two conference presentations: “La réception critique de *L’oiseau de feu* de Jacques Brossard: Un monument aux marges de la science-fiction québécoise” at the University of Concordia’s International Colloquium on “Le Québec, territoire à occuper: la réception de la science-fiction et du fantastique du Canada francophone,” Montréal, 5-7 May, 2006, and “Utopia, Dystopia, and Uchronia in the Science-Fiction Saga from Québec” at the Science Fiction Research Association Conference, 5-8 July, 2007, in Kansas City.

NOTES

¹ I offer special thanks to Claude Janelle and the team of Québec’s annual SF & F resource manual, *L’année de la science-fiction et du fantastique québécois*. Without their prior work in compiling bibliographical references on criticism sometimes over fifteen years old this study would have been much longer in its completion.

² This article was in fact inspired by the ambivalence of the wide range in responses I received to an inquiry about Brossard’s work that I made in January 2006 to the group *sf-boreal@grouperesyahoo.ca* whose subscribers include writers, critics, and readers of Canada’s French-language science-fiction and fantasy literatures.

³ Brossard had contributed to the growing anticipation with the publication of excerpts from the project in *La nouvelle barre du jour* and in anthologies edited by Michel Lord and André Carpentier.

⁴ I thank Pierre Filion at Éditions Leméac for his willingness to admit that, indeed, a work often referred to as a classic, at least in Québec’s science-fiction circles, did not go quickly out of print and that copies remain available (e-mail to the author, 28 March 2006).

⁵ Hélène Colas-Charpentier cites at least four works reflective of this atmosphere; in addition to those, Michel Lord has also observed the similarities between Brossard’s

trilogy and that of his contemporary Monique Corriveau, *Compagnon du soleil* (1976) (“Feu d’artifices” 28), a work that has suffered perhaps a similar fate. Although her world is equally fascinating, Corriveau, a noted writer for young adults, does not reflect in her style the same literary brilliance as Brossard. Coincidentally, one of the three volumes of *Compagnon* (the title of which bibliographies and histories of SFQ continue, erroneously, to render in the plural) is titled *L’oiseau de feu*. Daniel Sernine speculates that an element of overindulgence for a well-respected writer stricken with illness may have led FIDES to assume the financial risk of publishing Corriveau’s trilogy posthumously (41), acircumstances that establishes yet another parallel with Brossard’s magnum opus, which he had initially planned not to publish until after his own demise (Filion 192; AE 584). Lise Morin has also penned a “conte” entitled *L’oiseau de feu* (1992) which may be a homage to Brossard. Although the two works’ only similarity appears in the shared title, as a member of the editorial team of *imagine...* Morin must have known Brossard’s work; furthermore, she included analysis of one of his short stories in her compelling study of *La nouvelle fantastique au Québec* (1996).

⁶ The following abbreviations will be used to refer to the various volumes of the series: AA = 1. *Les années d’apprentissage*; RA = 2A. *Le recyclage d’Adakhan*; GP = 2B. *Le grand projet*; SQP = 2C. *Le sauve-qui-peut*; AE = 3. *Les années d’errance*.

⁷ These include the number of planets passed by the rocket ship that has departed from the Centrale, the description of heavenly bodies clearly coded as Mars and Jupiter, and time of rotation around the sun, gravity, etc. (AE 75-97, 36, 120).

⁸ Hard SF is the term often used for texts focusing on the physical sciences and technology, as opposed to “soft” SF, which introduces and explores changes in the social or psychological structures of human- or alienkind.

⁹ Brossard’s notion of “conditioning” refers in most cases to psychological indoctrination from a range of sources including the educational system, propaganda in the form of entertainment, or the type of “brainwashing” its technology allows the Centrale to perform on both Périphériens and Centraliens alike. It also involves an element of the type of behavioural conditioning found in the works of B.F. Skinner. Although it is unclear that Brossard meant to respond directly to Skinner’s utopian novel *Walden Two* (1948), or to his essay on behaviorism and utopia, “Freedom and the Control of Men,” it would seem likely that Brossard had some knowledge of Skinner’s work and theories.

¹⁰ Jean Tétreau’s *Les nomades* (1967) deals specifically with this theme as it recounts a young woman’s survival on a devastated, neo-primitive European continent. A Frenchman who published in Québec, Jean Bonelli in *Loona, ou autrefois le ciel était bleu* (1974) presents a future Earth that has become so contaminated the sky is no longer blue. The stories collected in René Beaulieu’s *Légendes de Virnie* (1981) are all set in a post-apocalyptic neomedieval world; Jean-François Somain’s *Dernier départ* (1989) stages a utopian reconstruction of human society by the ostensible survivors of an unnamed world catastrophe, and the list goes on.

¹¹ Hence the occasional identification of Gérard Bessette’s experimental novel *Les Anthropoïdes* (1977) as SF.

¹² An incomplete citation of Jung’s *Psychology and Alchemy* (1944), “Toute vérité n’est qu’une avant-dernière vérité,” precedes every volume of the cycle, with the concluding volume adding Jung’s original qualifier “humaine” to the type of truth in question (AE x). Clearly Brossard knew his Jung.

¹³ A fully developed discussion of the relationship between *L’oiseau de feu* and the vari-

ous forms of utopia, dystopia, and anti-utopia can be found in my forthcoming book on Québécois science fiction and postcolonial theory (McFarland, 2009).

¹⁴ While the rules of academic discourse require I cite sources for this assertion, professional etiquette leads me to protect the identity of individuals who made this admission in confidence.

¹⁵ Brossard's work, while it appropriates the conventions of a wide range of genres, in no way reflects the elements of the canonical *fantastique* as described by French and Québécois theorists such as Louis Vax, Irène Bessière, Roger Bozzetto, Max Milner, Roger Caillois, Michel Lord, or Lise Morin. Writers in the SFQ community often complain of the failure of the general press (to which Marie Voisard belongs) to research and understand the context when they write about popular genre forms.

¹⁶ Examples of word-play and self-referentiality occur in the termination of a radio contact during flight as "Rajeure. Oveure" ("Roger. Over"; GP 247), or in the statement that information may be classified as "Nitouno" ("Need to know"; RA 125), and in the creation of masculine and feminine forms for the abbreviated term for inhabitants of Adakhan's old quarter of Manokhsor, the "Ouest-Nord-Ouest," as onof (m.) and onove (f.) (GP 238), as well as in the references, some real, some invented to old "essef" novels (GP 305-06).

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