

Fernand Dumont, a Québécois Intellectual

Maxime BLANCHARD

In this article, I want to talk about the Québécois writer Fernand Dumont and the portrait that he makes of the *intellectuel engagé* (or the politically committed intellectual) in his autobiography, titled *Récit d'une émigration*. First, I will outline a biography of Fernand Dumont, and contextualize his work in Québécois history and literature. Second, I will examine Dumont's model of intellectual political involvement in his autobiography, where Dumont recalls his difficult journey towards political consciousness as an allegory of Québécois history. In his autobiography, Dumont refuses to speak about his private life. Rather than giving in to introspection, he writes himself into Québécois history. His personal narrative is interesting because of the way it parallels a collective struggle in Québec. As such, Dumont's autobiography bears personal witness to a national Québécois solidarity. Third, I will analyze what Fernand Dumont means by "émigration." Dumont explains that the intellectual is a symbolic emigrant, because he needs to somehow break with the very culture and country for which he is fighting, in order to be politically effective. Then, by invoking the importance of memory and solidarity, popular and high culture, childhood and maturity, Dumont attempts to create a model for intellectual political involvement in Québec, and elsewhere.

Fernand Dumont was born in 1927 in the town of Montmorency, a few kilometers north of Québec City. The son of textile factory workers, Dumont might also have become an employee of Montmorency's *Dominion Textile Factory*, if it had not been for his desire and resilience, and his parents' extraordinary encouragement, to pursue his education. After great difficulties, Dumont earned a bachelor's degree in sociology at the Université Laval in Québec City in 1952, before winning a scholarship to pursue his doctorate at the Sorbonne in Paris. On his return to Québec in 1955, he became a professor of sociology at the Université Laval, a post which he occupied until 1995. In 1952, Dumont published his first volume of poems titled, *L'Ange du matin*, followed by two later volumes of poetry, *Parler de septembre* in 1970 and *La Part de l'ombre* in 1995. In addition to hundreds of published articles on sociology, philosophy, politics, and literature, Dumont is the author of more than fifteen books, including *Le Lieu de l'homme* (1968), *Les Idéologies* (1974), *Le Sort de la culture* (1987) and *Raisons communes* (1995). Known for his great political involvement, Dumont became famous for his numerous radio interviews, television appearances, and newspaper editorials, where he argued in favor of social democracy, school and Church reform, and Québec's political sovereignty. For a brief period, Dumont served as the chief political advisor to René Lévesque, the Prime Minister of Québec, and in 1976-1977 was one of the authors of the *Chartre de la langue française* or *Loi 101*, which assures the protection and promotion of the French language in Québec. Dumont died in 1997.

Fernand Dumont's political and intellectual life parallels one of the most important periods in the political and cultural history of Québec. Born in 1927, Dumont grew up during a transitional period marked by rapid industrialization. In the 1930's, many English, American and Anglo-Canadian companies opened factories in Québec, where natural resources, lower costs and cheap labor could be found. From the First World War throughout the end of the 1950's, the population of major cities like Montréal, Québec City, and Trois-Rivières swelled due to the influx of rural workers. Uncontrolled industrialization and unplanned urbanization created extreme work and living conditions that were both ignored by complicit conservative governments, and denounced by a growing labor movement. In 1960, the newly-elected Prime Minister of Québec, Jean Lesage, began a radical program of modernization of Québécois society. By promoting universal health care, progressive tax reforms, nationalization of energy companies, reform of the education system, and the diffusion of art and culture, a team of dynamic ministers

attempted to establish social democracy in Québec. This tumultuous period between 1960 and 1970 is known as the “Révolution Tranquille.” It was during this time that the Québécois independence or sovereignty movement was born. In 1976, after eight years of political struggle for independence, the Parti Québécois was elected to power under the leadership of René Lévesque, who organized the 1980 referendum on Québécois sovereignty. Another referendum on Québécois sovereignty followed in 1995, and almost 50% of the population voted for independence. These three political projects — the labor movement, the development of social-democracy, and the sovereignty movement — were the focus of Fernand Dumont’s political and intellectual involvement in Québec.

In his writings, Fernand Dumont also took part in one of the most important Québécois literary movements. First published in the 1950’s, Dumont’s writings participate in the politically militant tradition of 20th century Québécois literature. Between 1945 and 1980, Québécois literature became an effervescent national literature characterized by rebellion, and by experimentation. Even if earlier in the 20th century, poets like Émile Nelligan and Hector de Saint-Denys Garneau had embraced contestation and modernity, Québécois literature was dominated by classic “rural” novels, such as *Maria Chapdelaine* by Louis Hémon, *Le Survenant* by Germaine Guèvremont, and *Menaud, maître-draveur* by Félix-Antoine Savard. Although evocative and beautiful, these “romans de la terre” did not fully reflect the new urban realities. The publication in 1948 of *Refus Global*, a manifesto against social status quo published by a group of young artists led by the painter Paul-Émile Borduas, marked the beginning of a new cultural era. From then on, Québécois literature became increasingly political in its attacks on the Anglo-Canadian colonialism, and on the Catholic Church conservatism. Novels by Anne Hébert and Marie-Claire Blais revisited scenes of a Québécois past that was both suffocating and full of wonder. Other novels by Jacques Godbout and Hubert Aquin introduced the first modern Québécois heroes who find their identity through *vécrire*: “vivre et écrire,” live fully and write. Plays by Michel Tremblay used *joual*, the slang of the Québécois working-class, staging theatrical provocations to bourgeois society. Feminist texts by Nicole Brossard, and Jovette Marchessault challenged patriarchal structures of power. The poetry of Gaston Miron, and Michèle Lalonde denounced social, cultural, and linguistic alienation in Québécois society.

Fernand Dumont’s memoirs, titled *Récit d’une émigration*, trace his life from childhood to maturity, from his birth in 1927 to his battle with

terminal cancer in 1997. However, Dumont's memoirs aspire to a larger historical and theoretical project than the mere accumulation of personal anecdotes. In fact, Fernand Dumont explains that, in writing *Récit d'une émigration*, his wish was not to write his autobiography, but to write a sequel to his book, *Genèse de la société québécoise*, an historical work on the evolution of Québec, from the arrival of Jacques Cartier in 1534 and the establishment of *Nouvelle France*, to the English Conquest in 1760, and the French uprising against English colonial rule in 1837. For Dumont, individual and personal consciousness are directly linked to collective and national consciousness. For Dumont, to tell one's own story is to talk about collective struggle and national history. "A parish child, I became the son of an uncertain country," he writes (*Genèse de la société québécoise* 12)¹. Thus, *Récit d'une émigration* is a theoretical and historical discussion of Québécois society in the form of a personal testimony or narrative.

In his memoirs, Dumont reiterates the main argument of his earlier masterwork, *Le Lieu de l'homme* first published in 1968, where he divided culture into two categories. The first category is popular culture (not to confuse with "commercial" culture) which is composed of family rituals, local customs, oral tradition, and social practices that are passed from one generation to another. "But", Dumont says, "there is always the unending, persistent possibility of rupture" (*Lieu de l'homme* 84) by the second category, which is the critical, analytical, and creative forces of high culture. According to Dumont, the intellectual is born out of this rupture between a popular culture and high culture, a rupture that initiates, at the same moment, the intellectual's distance from popular culture and the intellectual's consciousness of high culture. However, Dumont believes that, despite this distance and new consciousness, the intellectual is still linked to popular culture through memory and solidarity. If there is rupture, there is also reunion; despite distance, there is also return.

Dumont's personal *émigration* from the factory town of his youth to university life in Québec City and Paris, his journey from a working-class childhood to an intellectual *milieu* does not mean that he privileged high culture over popular culture. In fact, Dumont is saying the opposite. In his autobiography, he argues that his entire intellectual work is indebted to his early childhood relationship with popular culture. Indeed, popular culture contains not only the nostalgic memories of childhood, but also the seeds of intellectual engagement. Thus, popular culture is both the source and model of creativity and action. Dumont writes that, since the

past provides the intellectual with a sense of memory and solidarity, the intellectual owes an even greater debt to popular culture, because it is through this exemplary rupture between popular and high culture, this intellectual emigration, that the intellectual gains critical distance. In my discussion of Dumont's own intellectual emigration, I will now introduce two ideas that are central to his childhood and to his notion of intellectual engagement. First I will discuss Dumont's approach to memory. Secondly, I will examine Dumont's concept of solidarity.

In thinking about memory, Dumont asks: "Why should we remember?" (*Récit* 11). On the one hand, Dumont believes it is important to keep his origins in mind, since he finds inspiration for his intellectual and political work in his memories from childhood. On the other hand, his childhood years coincide with an important moment in the "transition and evolution of Québécois society" (*Récit* 34). Dumont calls his childhood a kind of "conjugation of myth and history" (*Récit* 29); but if his childhood is mythic, it was not perfect. Like all mythological narratives, Dumont's childhood was punctuated by serious events and interruptions. He is not interested in a discussion of the so-called "good old days." In the first chapter of *Récit d'une émigration*, titled "Le pays natal," Dumont begins with a description of himself at five years old: wracked by tuberculosis, weakened by a fever, but comforted by the muffled sounds of his mother busy in the adjoining kitchen. From the very first page of his autobiography, sickness and recuperation, fever and comfort are intermingled. The modest home of the Dumont family is nonetheless filled with the joys and affections of his parents. Weeks pass, punctuated only by grand Sunday mass, lively family suppers, Monday dinners shared with a local beggar, visits to neighbors, and household chores. Holidays give occasion to Christmas eve suppers at his grandmother's house, the ritual of midnight mass, noisy New Year's Eves with family relatives, and New Year's Day presents. In the summer, the family escapes to his grandmother's farm in the countryside of Charlevoix. Dumont describes what he calls the "miraculously intemporal" (*Récit* 11) hours of his childhood: a popular, folkloric, working-class, and typically Québécois childhood. But these memories are transformed into a political model because they contain both a sense of happiness and imminent corruption. If the young Dumont lives in a reassuring, cohesive world, he also overhears in the whispered conversations, a harsher social reality.

Death soon ruins what Dumont calls "the beautiful space of childhood" (*Récit* 14). One day, Fernand's uncle Amédée, Mme. Dumont's sickly, fragile older brother who works sporadically at the local textile

factory, decides to go to Québec City to see a film. After many hours and no word from Amédée, the Dumonts begin to worry, and decide to organize a search party. From his bed, where he pretends to be asleep, the young Fernand listens to the talk among the discouraged and empty-handed adults, until the radio announces that Amédée's body has been found, drowned in the port of Québec City. What, the young six-year-old Dumont wonders, was Uncle Amédée looking for in the city, "that place so different from *chez nous*?" (*Récit* 21) The details of this sordid and unexpected loss, Dumont's first confrontation with death, is accompanied by a description of Dumont's maternal relatives, the Pilote family of Saint-Pascal road in the village of Éboulements. Dumont's mischievous and animated cousin, Pierre Pilote, mesmerizes him and his family with colorful stories about magical elves, fairies, and talking animals. In his memoirs, Dumont honors the memory of his cousin and mentor, Pierre Pilote, a man who was a simple farmer, but whom Dumont remembers as a literary enchanter.

Through his contrast of the death of Amédée and the stories of Pierre, Dumont illustrates how both destruction and creation are present in popular culture. Later in *Récit d'une émigration*, Dumont reproduces this binary model when he describes the death of his sisters and his subsequent discovery of literature. Because of genetic birth defects, four of Dumont's little sisters died as infants. During the funeral services, Dumont carried their little white caskets to the village cemetery. This strange peasant custom, called the "responsabilité de l'aîné," required the oldest son to carry the caskets of infant siblings. Dumont's responsibility to these heavy white lacquered boxes left a macabre mark on his childhood, a memory that will haunt his later poems. In contrast to these white coffins, Dumont discovers at the same time his beloved first volume of literature, in a "book bound in black" (*Récit* 39). At school, Dumont finds in his classroom a copy of the plays of Pierre Corneille, bound in a black leather volume. For the young Dumont, the contrast between the white of his sisters' caskets and the black of the Corneille volume shows the rupture *within* popular culture, a rupture that parallels the rupture between popular and high culture. Similarly, the association that Dumont makes between the name of the storyteller Pierre Pilote and the playwright Pierre Corneille initiates a kind of literary consciousness. Dumont writes, "The past, both for society and for individuals, has a double meaning: the past conjures up obstacles which must be overcome, while providing, at the same time, a heritage of values to be invested in the future" (*Récit* 142). If Fernand Dumont does evoke the rich possibilities

of popular culture, he also shows its darker sides. It is here, amid the darker memories of his youth, that Dumont turns to the comfort of shared pain, collective struggle, and political solidarity.

If Dumont is guilty of childhood nostalgia, he demonstrates how this nostalgic past is a “significant example for the present” (*Récit* 34). In his autobiography, Dumont tries to “present a larger field of childhood consciousness” (*Récit* 14). As the cover photo of *Récit d’une émigration* illustrates, Fernand Dumont hung the framed photo of his father, dressed in factory clothes, on the shelves of his personal library. This powerful image of his father, an industrial laborer in a factory machine room, stands out amid all the books on Dumont’s shelf, such as *Problèmes de l’analyse symbolique*, *La Stratification sociale, inégalités sociales*, *Critique de la division du travail*, *L’Utopie*, *L’Imagination*, etc. In the middle of these books, the photo of Dumont’s father reminds the intellectual of his political responsibilities: memory becomes solidarity. On one hand, memory becomes solidarity by giving voice to the poor, the forgotten, and the silenced through creative and theoretical writing. “I protect concepts against powers that use them to oppress people like my parents. I don’t want to make the poor believe that I am illiterate. I defend theory, language, and literature for them” says Dumont (*Un témoin de l’homme* 70). On the other hand, memory is transformed into a responsibility to the present, and into concrete political actions.

In his description of a Québécois childhood, Dumont remembers that the joy of his family home was a victory over the misery of everyday life. At the same time, Dumont argues that the help and resourcefulness of family, friends, and neighbors in cohesive working class communities is not enough to hide the overcrowded living conditions, inadequate health care, and labor exploitation of the working poor. Picturesque rituals of religious devotion often hide the restrictive power of the Church, which is often complicit in the exploitation of its parishioners. The Québec of Dumont’s youth is also marked by cultural and linguistic segregation. In Dumont’s childhood village of Montmorency, the English-speaking factory bosses and their families live amid the garden terraces of the hill overlooking the Saint-Laurent River, while the French laborers and their families live in the crowded and squalid conditions down below². At the town’s *Dominion Textile Factory*, where he worked with his parents several summers as an adolescent, Dumont sees how old women, too poor to retire and too weak to operate machines, are left with the dirty and humiliating work of sorting scraps of cotton from the dust and trash of piles swept up from the factory floor. Dumont writes, “I have not forgotten,

now that I sit here amid my books, that one day I was confronted with the most abject humiliation" (*Récit* 57). At the same time, Dumont notes the parallel existence of the workers, who have invented a life of courage to combat their daily humiliation. He remembers how, as a laborer, he and his friends would debate theology and politics during their factory lunch-breaks. For Dumont, the memory of injustice reflects not only exploitation, but also collective consciousness, and a sense of solidarity.

To conclude, I want to reiterate how, in his *Récit d'une émigration*, Fernand Dumont describes his intellectual development, his emigration from the popular culture of his childhood to the high culture of his maturity. In his memories of childhood, Dumont returns to his cultural and political origins through the critical and analytical distance of the intellectual. In this way, he shows the historical and political importance of this past. For Dumont, individual consciousness and feelings of belonging — in other words solidarity and memory — are intimately connected. There is, in Dumont's work, a loyalty to the traditional *milieu* of his youth, but there is also a desire to change the exploitation and injustice of this imperfect past through the means of activism, theory, and creation. Dumont hopes to develop a political project from the authentic popular culture of his childhood, which is an inspiration, both as a model and a counter-model. In interrogating his own identity, Dumont enters into a collective debate on Québécois identity. Through his writing and his political involvement, Dumont ultimately hopes to transform personal memory into collective solidarity, and to create a model for political commitment in Québec.

Notes

1. Most of Fernand Dumont's articles and books have not been translated into English, and all translations are mine.
2. The factory and the workers' quarters have been demolished or remodeled. Today, tourists who marvel at the stunning waterfall, which made the factory run, are unaware of the exploited men and women who once worked on the site.

Work Cited

- Cantin, Serge (ed.). *Un Témoin de l'homme*. Montréal: L'Hexagone, 2000.
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