

Paul Bourget and La Nouvelle-France

Throughout the nineteenth century, the French maintained a fairly consistent tradition of writing travel journals of their visits to the Americas. Such travel literature allowed the writer to compare the Old World with the New and cast judgments about democracy, religion, and race in comparison to Europe, themes which are particularly relevant to our discussion about modernity. One such example of this literature is *Outre-Mer*¹ by Paul Bourget which was written over an eight-month period beginning in July 1893 and was published in Paris in 1895. Throughout 1894 and 1895 it was translated into English and published periodically in the *New York Herald*. Although Paul Bourget is best known for his 1883 collection *Essais de psychologie contemporaine*² and for his 1889 novel *Le Disciple*,³ his work today is viewed largely as minor literature. However, in the 1880s and 1890s, he was a widely read public figure, what we would consider to be a best-selling author, and literary celebrity.⁴ Between 1883 and 1893, more than one hundred articles in more than twenty different new papers and journals were consecrated to Bourget's works by other journalists. This is in addition to Bourget's own journalistic output that began in the 1870's and continued well into the twentieth century. Because of this, he was recognized in both France and French Canada as a public intellectual, particularly because of the polemics his novels launched in the press.⁵ Additionally, through the 1890s in particular, his stories and articles were translated into English and published largely in the *New York Herald*. His long-term friendship with Henry James solidified his reputation in the United States as noteworthy European intellectual and novelist.⁶ Thus, in 1893 he was received with great fan fare in Montreal and Quebec City, and the events of his three-week vacation were chronicled in nearly every francophone journal of Quebec.⁷ Despite this visit, when the book was published in 1895, French Canadians were surprised to find that Bourget did not mention them once, as if he had never traveled to Québec. The outcry from the public, in my opinion, was not about being snubbed, but showed that French Canadians genuinely wanted to hear Paul Bourget's opinion about their culture and society. So to meet this need, a French Canadian journalist

¹ Bourget, Paul. *Outre-mer: Notes sur l'Amérique* (Paris: A. Lemerre, 1895)

² Bourget, Paul. *Essais de psychologie contemporaine* (Paris: A. Lemerre, 1883)

³ Bourget, Paul. *Le Disciple* (Paris: A. Lemerre, 1889)

⁴ For example, Michel Mansuy notes that a remarkable 22,000 copies of *Le Disciple* were sold within six weeks in 1889. In referring to the critical reception of the book, Mansuy observes: "[L]e Disciple est un événement littéraire (le Gaulois), un livre de premier ordre (les Débats), une oeuvre puissante qui révolutionne la France à juste titre (la Nouvelle Revue), l'un des chefs d'oeuvres de notre langue (la Revue bleue), le plus beau et le plus viril des romans (Polybiblion)." Mansuy, Michel. *Un moderne : Paul Bourget de l'enfance au Disciple* (Paris : Les Belles lettres, 1960) 505

⁵ For example, the simultaneous publications in 1885 of Guy de Maupassant's *Bel ami* and Paul Bourget's *Cruelle énigme* created a polemic in the press that lasted for several months in which the author's were accused of engendering the new *mal du siècle*. A similar debate concerning the ability of literature and philosophy to pervert the youth was discussed for nearly six months in the French press after the publication of Bourget's *Le Disciple* in 1889. For a discussion of these polemics see Mansuy, Michel. *Un moderne : Paul Bourget de l'enfance au Disciple* (Paris : Les Belles lettres, 1960) 401-407, 506-513, respectively

⁶ The Houghton Library, Harvard College Library, at Harvard University houses nearly one hundred letters exchanged between Paul Bourget and Henry James from 1884 to 1911.

⁷ For a well-documented presentation of Bourget's reception in Quebec, see Dorion, Gilles. *Présence de Paul Bourget au Canada* (Québec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 1977) 29-36

and editor named Sylva Clapin wrote *Sensations de Nouvelle-France*⁸ with the subtitle “Pour faire suite à *Outre-Mer*” and signed the book Paul Bourget.

When an author writes a pastiche, or a parody, or a forgery in this case, they not only have at their disposal the language and style of the author, but they also have a fully developed ideology, and in this case, the forger has Paul Bourget’s celebrity, meaning that there is a built in readership that an unknown author could not possibly have.⁹ Apart from the intrigue of the forgery itself, which I will return to later on, my interest is in Sylva Clapin’s appropriation of Bourget’s political and social ideology and the exploitation of his celebrity which he used to create his own literary work and launch a polemic in the francophone journals of Québec in 1895.

To begin with, it should be clear that although he was a public figure in the 1890s, Bourget’s reputation was rather dubious because of the decadent Parisian society he portrayed in his novels and the questionable morality of his characters. In France and Quebec Bourget was criticized and lauded from each side of the same coin. In terms of criticism, there was a somewhat general fear that readers, particularly women, would be influenced, even perverted, by the immorality of his characters. In his criticism of Bourget’s 1886 novel *Un crime d’amour*, Edmond Scherer, after having noted the author’s « descriptions licencieuses », his numerous “images de sensualité” and “obscénité,” asks himself “quel plaisir l’artiste, le véritable artiste, peut éprouver à écrire des choses qu’un mari qui respecte sa femme ne lui laissera jamais lire, ou qu’elle ne lira pas sans s’en sentir flétrie.”¹⁰ The French Canadian press also criticized the author for these same reasons. For example, l’abbé Joseph Desrosiers groups Bourget among the naturalists in writing, “Il y a comme une conspiration de présenter sous un jour d’apothéose les dépravations les plus naturalistes. Cette vigoureuse apostrophe peut s’appliquer à [...] un grand nombre et entre autres à [...] Léon Cladel, Paul Bourget [...]. Ce que font ces auteurs n’est autre chose que de la pornographie.”¹¹ Conversely, he was applauded for exposing this “real” or “authentic” morality to serve as an example of how not to live. The main reason this question was so important is that Bourget’s readership was mostly women, and his books were considered drawing-room reading, a point that was mentioned in several articles published in Quebec in the early 1890s just before his visit.¹² This debate, then, was in the air on the eve of his arrival.

In the bigger picture of Bourget’s life and work, it is crucial to note that over a fifteen-year period from the early 1880s to the late 1890s, he himself went through a radical shift in ideology, particularly in relation to religion. He went from being in his early years what may be considered a nihilist dandy, for whom morality is a sort of intellectual plaything

⁸ Bourget, Paul. *Sensations de Nouvelle-France: Montréal, Trois-Rivières, Québec* [A work purporting to be by Paul Bourget. Written by Sylva Clapin] (Boston: Sylva Clapin, 1895)

⁹ For an in-depth discussion on the nature of pastiche and parody in the late nineteenth century, see Austin, James. *Proust, pastiche, and the postmodern, or Why style matters* (Lewisburg, Pa. : Bucknell University Press ; Lanham, Maryland : Co-published with the Rowman & Littlefield Pub. Group, Inc., 2013) 27-41

¹⁰ Scherer, Edmond. « Un crime d’amour », *Le Temps*. 4 mars 1886.

¹¹ Desrosiers, Joseph. *La Revue canadienne*, 24 (1888) p. 235. Citation taken from Gilles Dorion, *Présence de Paul Bourget au Canada*. 18

¹² Dorion, Gilles. *Présence de Paul Bourget au Canada* (Québec: Les Presses de l’Université Laval, 1977) 22-26

(see *Essais de psychologie contemporaine* and *Mensonges*,¹³ for example), to being in his later years a Catholic reactionary and a monarchist (see *L'Étape*¹⁴ and *Un Divorce*¹⁵). His novels from this later period are largely moralizing tales that seek to reinforce social structures of marriage and class. It is this second Bourget, the one that begins to attach himself to Catholicism in the early 1890s that was particularly relevant to French speaking Canada, and which, in my opinion, Clapin sought to exploit in his forgery.

In terms of Bourget's political ideology, which Clapin used, and which directly engages concepts of modernity, Bourget can properly be situated as the disciple of Hippolyte Taine and as the master of Maurice Barrès. From Hippolyte Taine, Bourget inherited the philosopher's famous positivist formula later on used by Émile Zola of *La Race, le milieu, and le moment*. Bourget is, in his turn, the intellectual master of Maurice Barrès, who is known for his series *Le Culte du Moi*¹⁶ and *Les Déracinés*¹⁷ in which he famously proposes the philosophy of *La terre et les morts* which serve as the foundation of his long political career and the basis of his nationalist philosophy. Like Barrès, race and nationalism are extremely important themes for Bourget and appear frequently in *Outre-mer*. In the late 1880s, however, Bourget grew increasingly skeptical of the positivist philosophy championed by Taine, which privileges rationality and science over faith and tradition. This turn against Taine and the philosophy he stood for is the basis of *Le Disciple*, which, according to most historians, marks the definitive turning point in Bourget's religious and scientific ideology, that is, his turn toward the Catholic faith.

In the introduction of *Outre-mer*, which served as the model of Clapin's forgery, Bourget clearly outlines his political and social ideology as it stood in 1894. In this, one can hear echoes of both Hippolyte Taine and Maurice Barrès. In the first few pages he states: “[O]n ne s'expatrie jamais. Si loin qu'on soit de sa terre et de toute terre, on n'a qu'à descendre au plus intime de sa pensée pour se retrouver citoyen, non pas du monde, mais du petit coin de sol dont on est issu. Ce qui m'attire en Amérique ce n'est pas l'Amérique elle-même, c'est l'Europe et c'est la France, c'est l'inquiétude des problèmes où l'avenir de cette Europe et de cette France est enveloppé.”¹⁸ As he proposes it, Bourget's trip through North America is an exploration of the American people in the service of better understanding France and Europe and the problems of modernity. Essentially, these three problems, what he names as “les trois Divinités,” which are inevitable and which are destroying Europe, are the three things which created the Americas: Democracy, Science, and Race. According to Bourget, democracy is a negative force in Europe because universal suffrage allows for what he calls “la tyrannie imbécile du nombre,” that is, when the lower classes are raised up and the upper classes are pushed down the result is a mediocre society run by unqualified, uncultivated individuals who are at the mercy of the masses. Science is detrimental because of the positivist ideology behind it which negates spirituality, religion, and even morality. Religion is replaced by what Bourget calls “le nihilisme philosophique” which collectively creates “une conscience nationale” made of “des consciences moyennes” completely devoid of faith. Lastly, the problem of race is that it creates strife between individuals and nations that should essentially remain homogenous and separate. Interestingly, however, where these

¹³ Bourget, Paul. *Mensonges* (Paris: A. Lemerre, 1887)

¹⁴ Bourget, Paul. *L'Étape* (Paris: Plon, 1902)

¹⁵ Bourget, Paul. *Un Divorce* (Paris: Plon, 1904)

¹⁶ Barrès, Maurice. *Le Culte du moi. Édition définitive* (Paris: Plon, 1966) (Orig. 1888-1891)

¹⁷ Barrès, Maurice. *Les Déracinés* (Paris: Fasquelle, 1897)

¹⁸ Bourget, Paul. *Outre-mer: Notes sur l'Amérique*. 5-6

three forces are destroying Europe they are at the core of what creates the Americas. He writes: “Or un pays s’est rencontré où ces trois forces si meurtrières à notre vieux monde ont été appelées à façonner de toutes pièces un univers nouveau, un pays qui s’est constitué dès le premier jour en démocratie, et en démocratie scientifique parce qu’il a dû employer à dompter une terre toute vierge l’appareil le plus moderne des machines et de l’industrie, un pays devant lequel le problème des races s’est dressé dès son origine, et qui s’y heurte encore à chaque instant, puisqu’il est un terrain d’alluvion pour toutes les nations d’Europe, d’Afrique et d’Asie, et qu’il lui faut vivre ensemble non seulement des Anglais et des Irlandais, des Allemands et des Français, mais des noirs et des jaunes avec les blancs. Jusqu’à présent il paraît y avoir réussi.”¹⁹ It is the success of the Americas that fascinates him and it is from these three points of departure, the question of Democracy, Science and Race, that he returns to again and again in *Outre-Mer*.

These then are the tools, the ideology, that Sylva Clapin is working with in his forgery. As stated in the introduction, Sylva Clapin was a Canadian journalist and editor. He printed *Sensations de Nouvelle-France* in Worcester, Massachusetts near Boston in the atelier of the French Canadian journal *L’Opinion publique*. Extracts of his forgery were first published on April 2, 1895 in *La Presse*, and then picked up by most of the French-Canadian newspapers which published those elements of the book they found to be the most interesting or provocative.²⁰ It was only three weeks later, on April 19th that it was revealed that the book was a forgery by *L’Opinion publique*. But by this time, Clapin had achieved his goal of launching a fairly significant polemic in the French Canadian Press. The main attacks that Clapin made and those that gained traction in the press were, firstly, the domination of the Anglo-Saxon minority over the French Canadian majority, secondly, a denunciation of the Quebec education system, and thirdly, the French Canadians’ submission to the Catholic Church.²¹ In order to engage these three points, Clapin employs Bourget’s “Trois divinités” of Democracy, Science, and Race in several surprisingly contradictory ways. One of the brilliant aspects of Clapin’s forgery, is that he was not only able to incorporate Bourget’s ideology as presented in *Outre-Mer*, but also many other philosophical elements found in his writing including elements of decadence and perversion. The most important one for his analysis is Bourget’s Anglophilia, that is, his complete admiration of Anglo-Saxon culture which the pseudo-Bourget used to point out the French-Canadians’ shortcomings.

The point of departure in Clapin’s forgery, the essential problem that the pseudo-Bourget tries to understand throughout the book, is how the Anglo-Saxon minority completely dominates the French-Canadian majority in Quebec. His first approach to this problem is through race. In one of the opening scenes, we find the pseudo-Bourget walking the streets of Montreal when he comes across a group of students from McGill University playing football. He writes of these young Anglo-Saxons: “Les joueurs étaient tous des jeunes gars, à peine entrés dans l’adolescence, mais témoignant d’une telle intensité de vie, d’une telle turbulence de belle et saine jeunesse que, malgré lui, le passant le plus indifférent devait s’arrêter et les regarder avec un plaisir attendri.”²² However, after watching this strong, vigorous, healthy group of Anglo-Saxons, the pseudo-Bourget comes to pass the Collège de Montréal, and for him the difference is striking. He notes, “Jamais je n’oublierai l’impression

¹⁹ Bourget. *Outre-mer*. 8-9

²⁰ For a detailed bibliography in which the extracts of Clapin’s forgery appear in the francophone press, see Gilles Dorion. *Présence de Paul Bourget au Canada*. 60-61

²¹ Ibid. 60-81

²² Bourget [Clapin] *Sensations*. 23

de malaise subit que je ressentis à la vue de ces collégiens en tunique étriquées, marchant d'un air monacal et recueilli, et se poussant nonchalamment les pieds à travers les amas de feuilles mortes qui couvraient les trottoirs. J'eus comme la sensation brusque d'un cortège de ratés et de fruits secs, que plus tard la vie impitoyable broierait sans merci."²³ In the real Bourget's novels and essays, this type of observation is typical of the French but it is almost always cast in the light of a decadent and sick French society.²⁴ But in the New World, far from France, these "racial" issues are still present, a point observed by other French critics. Immediately after this passage, he evokes a study written by Pierre de Coubertin titled *Les Universités transatlantiques* in which the author notes that it is in Québec where "les Anglais et les Français se rencontrent sans se mêler."²⁵ The pseudo-Bourget takes this observation to another level, that is, as a clash of civilizations. He goes on to write: "Il ne s'agit plus même de deux races quelconques, jetées en face l'une de l'autre par le hasard des événements, mais bien plutôt de deux civilisations types, dont l'une, incapable de se transfuser du sang nouveau, reste oscillante et indécise, tandis que l'autre, grâce à sa souplesse et ses facultés d'assimilation, rebondit sur la route des siècles à venir avec un regain d'ardente et impétueuse jeunesse."²⁶

The pseudo-Bourget goes on to ask himself, how is it that a race could become so oppressed? In the case of these young men, the simple answer is their seminary education. He writes, "Dans les collèges canadiens-français, on donne trop de part au dilettantisme classique, et à l'alanguissement qu'amène la contemplation prolongée du passé. Forcément, aussi, dans ces collèges, l'élève s'imprègne peu-à-peu de l'esprit ambiant, esprit en grande partie dirigé dans un sens de soumission absolue et de détachement des choses de ce monde. Et c'est pourtant dans la mêlée de ce même monde—et un monde, encore, qui, comme en Amérique, exige du neuf, de l'exubérance, presque de l'agressif—qu'il faudra plus tard, avec sa diathèse de passivité, lutter, vivre, se pousser des coudes et des pieds, engager enfin l'âpres combat pour l'existence."²⁷ Again, the author proposes a Social Darwinian reading of race and culture in French Canada. Existence in the New World demands aggression and a forward-looking vision of life which the Anglo-Saxons in both America and Canada fully embrace. The seminary education that the young French-Canadians receive is a backward looking oppressive system that essentially perverts these young men and stunts their development.

This particular passage from *Sensations de Nouvelle-France* was widely circulated in the journals in April of 1895, and while the question of race was largely dismissed as being hyperbolic and really not a useful point of discussion, the question of seminary education was a flashpoint for those seeking reform, because through the education system, a clear separation is created between the French-speaking Canadians and the Anglo-Saxons. The French-Canadian newspaper *Le Canada artistique*, which became *Canada-Revue*, published several dozen articles on the question of educational reform between 1890 and 1895 when the forgery was published.²⁸ But because of the pseudo-Bourget's celebrity, and the fact that

²³ Bourget [Clapin] *Sensations*. 24

²⁴ For a discussion of the male body in relation to decadent aesthetics see Lawrence Schehr, *Parts of an Andrology: On Representations of Men's Bodies* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997)

²⁵ Coubertin, Pierre de. *Universités transatlantiques* (Paris: Hachette, 1890)

²⁶ Bourget [Clapin] *Sensations*. 25

²⁷ Bourget [Clapin] *Sensations*. 26

²⁸ Dorion. *Présence de Paul Bourget au Canada*. 73

people believed it was a French man making these observations, this discussion was brought back into the forefront of intellectual discourse.

The pseudo-Bourget's criticism of the French-Canadian race and seminary education fall under his larger critique of Latin mysticism and religiosity in contrast to Anglo-Saxon pragmatism and productivity. To underscore this point, he describes two engravings, one of Jacques Cartier planting the cross at Gaspé, and the other of the Puritans arriving at Plymouth in Massachusetts. In the first image described by the pseudo-Bourget, Jacques Cartier is depicted planting a cross in the New World beside a priest surrounded by soldiers. It represents a religious moment of gratitude and prayer but more importantly for the pseudo-Bourget, of submission to the Catholic Church. The second image described is of the Puritans arriving in Massachusetts and presents a group of women making soup and washing clothes, while the men in the distance march in formation. After describing these two images, the pseudo-Bourget writes, "Ah ma pauvre France chérie, la vois-tu bien là maintenant, ton erreur, et sais-tu pourquoi ton œuvre d'Amérique devait fatalement péricliter, puis se fondre et s'évanouir devant le colosse anglo-saxon?"²⁹ Why would you spend your time praying, trying to convert savages and looking back to the Old World when there is so much work to do right now? While the Anglo-Saxons are busy making food and tending to the practicalities of carving out an existence in this hostel land, you are on your knees bowing to the church. The Anglo-Saxons had come to found their own religions in the New World, while the French-Canadians were still under the thumb of the Catholic Church and rather than create new institutions, particularly in the realm of education, they sought to replicate the Old World. Thus argued the pseudo-Bourget.

The pseudo-Bourget calls this submission "un abus de 'paternalisme' ecclésiastique"³⁰ but just when his criticism is the most sever, he breaks down, and says, "je nargue", or I'm only teasing, which seems to be a ploy to lighten the mood especially when he sets his sights on the Catholic Church. As mentioned earlier, it was in the early 1890s that Bourget began acknowledging the importance of Catholic morality, not so much the Catholic Church, but Catholic morality. News of Bourget's "conversion" to Catholicism was acknowledged in the French Canadian journals just before his visit, and Clapin would have been aware of this. I would argue that Clapin exploited this emerging sympathetic ear from the Catholics in order to criticize them. Throughout all of Bourget's work, there is this essential pose of praise and criticism. The pseudo-Bourget praises exemplary Canadians, particularly men in the Church, and then after this seduction, he turns it around to show how they are actually holding French-Canadian society back.

In order to drive his point home, the pseudo-Bourget transcribes a conversation he has with a "prominent" though unnamed French Canadian, thus displacing direct criticism. Throughout this reported speech the word "résignation" rings out like the bells from the Citadelle above Quebec City. This unnamed speaker describes French-Canadians, under the thumb of the Catholic Church as "ces garnconnets élevés fort tard par leurs mères"³¹ and then goes on to say, "cette résignation, on nous l'a tellement martelée, que nous avons fini par en recevoir, dans le cou, comme un cassure qui nous donne l'attitude passive de bêtes de joug".³² He then argues that the Théocratie had essentially become an Autocratie and that

²⁹ Bourget [Clapin] *Sensations*. 48

³⁰ Bourget [Clapin] *Sensations*. 73

³¹ Bourget [Clapin] *Sensations*. 75

³² Bourget [Clapin] *Sensations*. 76

the church and the people “étaient maintenant comme deux flots—l’un d’huile et l’autre d’eau—coulant contigûs l’un à l’autre, mais sans jamais se mêler”.

Overall, the forgery concludes on a very optimistic note. Clearly, the French-Canadians of Quebec have to deal internally with their own issues related to education reform and their relationship to the Catholic Church, but as Frenchman, the pseudo-Bourget optimistically declares that “une république franco-américaine” “libre et indépendante par elle-même” would be a testament to the glory of French civilization.

To conclude on the issue of the forgery, the book by Clapin was published first in extracts in various journals then in its entirety at the beginning of April 1895, which launched several polemics in the press. This continued until the 19th of April when work was revealed to be a forgery by journal *L’Opinion publique* as it was in their print shop in Worcester that the pastiche was printed. Sylva Clapin made a sort of detraction in a published interview in which he stated that the forgery was “une sorte d’exercice psychologique « à la Paul Bourget »”. He went on to explain, “Il s’agissait, en somme, tout bonnement de ceci: imaginez [*sic*] un écrivain ayant le talent littéraire de Paul Bourget, puis faire voyager rapidement cet homme à travers le Canada français, et chercher à appliquer à la compréhension de ce qu’il pouvait voir et ressentir, la « façon » personnelle de l’auteur du « Disciple »”.³³ Bourget eventually got wind of this forgery, and a letter he wrote denouncing it was published in the *La Patrie* in which he condemned “un véritable *faux* en matière littéraire.”³⁴ Despite the controversy of the forgery, the polemics it launched were heated. Importantly, they are based on the three essential questions of modernity Paul Bourget named as les “Trois Divinités” which repose on questions of Democracy, Race, and Religion.

³³ La Presse, 9 août 1895. Cited in Dorion. *Présence de Paul Bourget au Canada*. 88

³⁴ La Patrie, 17 mai 1895. Cited in Dorion. *Présence de Paul Bourget au Canada*. 85