

Struggle Against Repression in Gaétan Brulotte's *Le surveillant*

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Born and raised in Québec, Gaétan Brulotte completed his doctoral dissertation under the direction of Roland Barthes at the University of Paris VII. Brulotte, whose increasing reputation rests on three majors works, *L'emprise* (1979), *Le surveillant* (1982), and *Ce qui nous tient* (1988), has received several awards and recognitions for his writing. *Le surveillant*, the focus of this article, was chosen for the prestigious Prix Adrienne-Choquette in 1981 and the Prix France-Québec in 1983. It was selected as *Le Livre du mois* by L'Office des Communications sociales (Gouvernement du Québec) and by the review *Nos Livres* in 1983. It was also nominated as finalist for the Governor General's Award in 1982.

Endowed with abundant richness and variety, Brulotte's works are nevertheless linked and achieve a remarkable degree of coherence and unity. *L'emprise* lays the seeds for the later works. In this novel, the protagonist observes every move of a man in order to create a character for a novel he is writing. The surveillance becomes an obsession. With time, the novelist discovers that his subject is watching him with the intent of writing about him in a literary creation of his own. Author and model are doubles of each other, and in the end, the writer becomes the very person he has scrutinized so painstakingly. The experience exacts a heavy price. The watcher and the watched, the pursuer and the victim, each one loses his identity and his soul to the other. "L'emprise," which is the subjection of the will of one person to another, is far-reaching in its consequences and is total. Themes suggested in this novel (the act of writing including the redemptive power of the word but also dangers inherent in the creation of a work of art, the oppression and destruction of the self by others, the search for understanding in the midst of the absurdity of all-powerful, unfeeling institutions and systems) surface and are expanded in later works. In *Ce qui nous tient*, a collection of stories most of which had appeared in other publications, doubling and mixed identities, concerns about artistic creation, the quest for discovery of self and meaning in existence,

all of these and more continue to be explored in perceptive and fascinating ways.

If Brulotte so persistently raises interesting issues concerning the creative process, it is no doubt due to the fact that writing is such an integral and fundamental part of his life. He has said as much. For him writing is "une activité totalitaire." It enriches and validates his life. "Je vis pour écrire. Et si j'écris, je vis" ("Vie et Ecriture" 47). A most careful and meticulous craftsman, he is constantly experimenting with sounds and meanings, inventing, in some instances, new words when old ones do not fit his purposes. He has succeeded admirably in creating a provocative, open-ended art of suggestion in which the most appropriate expression matches his thought so that the two, word and idea, blend, fuse, and become one. (See Brown 147-57).

Most critics have emphasized the repressive nature of Gaétan Brulotte's fictional world portrayed in his collection of ten stories entitled *Le surveillant*. Ruth Mésavage, for example, studies authoritarian, official speech (orders, directives, memos, rules, and the like) and demonstrates effectively how this kind of language degrades, dehumanizes, restricts, and finally stifles human initiative and purposeful living (184-202).

Theories in reader-response criticism invite an active interaction and dialog between the reader's self and another self offered by the text in order to discover and amplify possible meanings suggested but not developed in the work. Brulotte's stories resist closure, leaving provocative reader spaces, reader gaps, to be filled and expanded by the reader. One such, a voice much less apparent than that of authority and power, opposes attempts to strangle creativity and silence meaningful communication. In this paper, I will analyze this muted, understated expression in Brulotte's first story in the collection (*Le surveillant* 11-32) and trace the protagonist's attempts, by means of his thought and writing, to break through the system, understand himself, and make sense, if possible, of an absurd world.

In *Le surveillant*, the reader meets a sentry, the narrator of the story, who spends his life watching a wall, an activity which becomes the object, the reason, the sum, the end of his existence. When the commander gives an order he expects it to be followed implicitly and without question. A command demands action, not thought. *Le surveillant*, nameless, alienated, detached from others and himself, lost, anonymous in the indifference of the system, must not think while he is on duty. He has no right to think. The commander symbolizes total, mindless discipline. He is the figure that sobers the watcher when he is on the verge of thinking. It is he who reprimands him when he

catches him laughing or maybe daydreaming, both actions which signify feeling and thought.

The military, a system requiring total adherence to authority, provides a most appropriate setting for the story. No description in *Le surveillant* links the story to Brulotte's native Québec or any other specific place, and thus with unnamed location and characters, Brulotte's work is generalized and raised to a universal level. The struggle between commanding officer and soldier reenacts an ageless drama which occurs anywhere, at any time, and in any situation where an oppressor, jealous of power and privileges and completely committed to the system, subjugates a victim.

The idea of surveillance is particularly important in the story. *Le surveillant* is not the only watcher. He is being watched constantly and relentlessly by his new officer, a strict, stern disciplinarian who checks up on him eight times a day to begin with, and after he catches him laughing on duty, twice as often. The officer comes at random times and watches the sentry through binoculars from his lookout tower. He also sends other soldiers to observe the sentry and prepare reports on his behavior. In this climate of fear and suspicion, all the soldiers check up on each other. The title of the story takes on multiple meanings. Everyone is a watcher and is being watched.

It is a method of systematic limitation, a process of reduction which has diminished the mission and purpose of the soldier's life and conditioned him to automatic obedience to the rule of his superiors. His very breath of life is determined and regulated by the system. "Voilà bien votre faiblesse, m'a dit un jour mon ancien chef. Vous voulez être partout, et vous n'êtes nulle part. A l'avenir, contrôlez votre respiration" (13).

If *le surveillant* does not regret any more his choice to spend his life watching a wall, he is not completely satisfied with that decision either. ". . . je n'en suis pas fier non plus" (13). He still retains, however dimly, a recollection of a time when his view of existence was not lopped off, fettered, reduced, stunted. In his youth, a previous self, a free spirit embarked on a quest in search of new experiences and discovery. "Avant, j'ouvrais différemment. Je me dispersais. Je voulais en aveugle suivre tous les chemins, tout brûler et rire. Ah! comment devenir fou et feu, j'en détenais le secret, vous pouvez me croire. Ma clé? S'éparpiller. La réponse à tout? La flambée. Consumer et ensuite ricaner: il en résulte toujours quelque chose. A tout le moins le plaisir de traverser" (12-13). In sharp contrast to the stasis of the soldier's present regimented existence, strong verbs in the passage just cited (se disperser, suivre tous les chemins, tout brûler, devenir, s'éparpiller,

consumer, traverser) build passion at white heat and mark a thrust of vital forward movement. Other verbs, *rire* and *ricaner*, demonstrate the sentry's previous scorn of established protocol and habit. The expression, *en aveugle*, indicates that all options, experiences, and ideas were open in the soldier's youth to exploration and scrutiny. Habit, dull routine, clichés, and prejudices were swept away, and desires previously incarcerated were released and allowed to seek fulfillment and abundance. The alliteration in *fou et feu* forces the reader to pay special attention to the ardor and excitement that the words connote. The fact that *le surveillant* expresses this brief yet exotic description of his early life proves that his repression is not total. The memory of former delights persists. The tone of the passage is nostalgic, and the *Ah!* with its exclamation mark suggests a longing for a return to the previous richer and happier state.

Sartre's collection of stories in *Le Mur*, in which a wall, as symbol, separates, distances, alienates characters, and blocks their communication and feelings of warmth and tenderness, provides, by contrast, an interesting intertext to *Le surveillant* in which the wall takes on shifting roles and meanings as the story progresses. The account of the watcher belongs to the literature of the absurd, and thus the wall, a structure falling down, incapable of defense, and of no strategic importance, is the very symbol of the absurd. Its surveillance makes no sense despite all efforts by the military to make it appear purposeful by cancelling personal freedom and initiative in favor of discipline, order, and sense of duty.

With time, the wall, still the reason for mindless, mechanical, puppet-like, insignificant routine, assumes other dimensions. The first notion of wallness deconstructs, the wall becoming the soldier's means of introspection and self-analysis. Much like the plague in Camus' *La Peste*, the wall in *Le surveillant* embodies the notion of the absurd and at the same time provides the source and serves as means for understanding and explaining that condition.

As the soldier comes to know the wall, he begins to understand himself and his life. The sentry's relationship to the wall, at first an exercise in duty, progresses with time to affection and finally the hope of communication. "D'ailleurs, j'aime mon mur. A force de le fréquenter, j'ai appris à le connaître . . . Il m'accepte . . . Je dirais même mieux: derrière son apparence impassible, parfois des mouvements secrets l'animent. Il désire communiquer . . . Une bonne fois je lui dirai: Parle-moi. Et il me parlera" (15). If speech is absent (at least for the time being), understanding is not; it occurs at a level beyond words in silence.

"J'ai ma petite idée et je la garde pour moi. Ou je la confie au mur, on peut se fier à lui, il connaît l'art de se taire (c'est ça la sagesse)" (17).

For twenty-five years, the soldier tells us, he has watched the wall and it has become part of his life. If he leaves it, he indicates, a whole section of his being will collapse behind him. The wall is personified. "La nuit, c'est facile de nous rapprocher. Je me pousse davantage contre lui. J'aime fréquenter son odeur de cave et sentir, dans la froideur de son épiderme, monter une bienfaisante chaleur. Il vit: il dégage un certain souffle et vers le soir, il ramollit. Ses fibres se détendent. Il dort" (16). The wall reaches out to the soldier; it stiffens like a phallus; he says that it accepts him and that it calls to him. The sentry must find out what the wall wants. "Il fait partie de ma vie maintenant; cette paroi en décrépitude, c'est un peu moi" (14). The relationship between the soldier and the wall is very private. In the mind of *le surveillant*, the wall knows all of his most intimate and basic thoughts, and as the soldier is in search of meaningful interchange with the wall, it wishes for contact with him. The wall as a living presence for the soldier has the capacity for communication; it contains imbedded in its soul a wide gamut of feelings and ideas to convey to the sentry. "En tout cas, sous le soleil de midi [here a symbol of inspiration, of insights], je sens en lui [the wall] tout un monde impatient de contradictions, de rage et d'explosions" (15). This portrayal of the wall mirrors *le surveillant's* descriptions of his own feelings about life in his youth and explains, in part, his attachment and kinship to it. If only he can unlock and release what is hidden deep in the wall, *le surveillant* may begin to sort out and define among the contradictions of the wall a way of dealing with the inherent nonsense and absurdity of his own existence.

As the first depiction of the wall shifts in meaning, the portrayal of the soldier as mindless robot also deconstructs, for juxtaposed with the depiction of the subjugated soldier, a victim conditioned to such an extent that he fires on his brother bringing gifts from the family, is another quite different image of him, a man who questions, ponders, wonders, strives to comprehend himself and his situation. He asks hard questions about himself and the wall. "A quoi sert ce mur, me demandera-t-on? De rempart, de clôture, de brise-vent? A-t-il pour fonction de protéger, de défendre, d'arrêter, de ralentir, de cacher, de contenir, de circonscrire, de détourner? Ou s'agit-il tout simplement de leurrer? D'y occuper des hommes?" (23). These are open-ended questions far removed from the closed nature of the soldier's daily watch. *Le surveillant* is clearly wondering about the meaning of his assignment. "Des fois, je me demande pourquoi j'ai passé toute ma vie ici" (24). He discovers that military discipline only maintains busy work,

that his watch is absurd, and finally, if others may attach importance to it, he knows that his assignment is of no value. "Car il y a de ces gens, c'est bien connu, qui veulent à tout prix se sentir utiles" (23). Despite appearances to the contrary, *le surveillant* is not one of these. Concerning awareness of the absurd, *le surveillant* is not unlike Meursault, who is the personification of the condition he comes to understand.

Nevertheless, the sentry keeps his watch faithfully and then one day starts to write his life story, the very story he is telling. The reader learns that Brulotte and his protagonist are writing the same story. A kind of mirror effect is produced with reflections embracing author, protagonist, and reader. *Le surveillant's* writing is an essential part of his search for meaning, and the fact that he is writing his memoirs indicates that his wish is to know himself.

The scene between the sentry and the commander at the moment the sentry is caught writing his life's story reinforces the notion of the value of the word. The commander appears suddenly without warning. Pen and paper in hand, rather than a rifle, *le surveillant* is clearly derelict in his duty. He must be dismissed. He thinks and feels too much to be a soldier; the pen and paper symbolize his thought. The dismissal, though imposed for negligence of duty, is really a consequence of the sentry's writing. "Cette dernière défaite" (the dismissal) is "attribuable tout compte fait à l'écriture" (30). The system recognizes the threat that a thinking soldier represents to its power. It is for this reason that it has done its utmost to control *le surveillant's* thought; it is also for this reason that it will dispose of him now.

Le surveillant spends his last evening in concentrated thought, recalling his important experiences with the wall. At this moment he is aware of his thoughts and feelings; he understands the significance of communication. Separation from the wall represents the loss of opportunity to scrutinize his existence. Deciding on death as a release from the oppression of life, the watcher writes some of his last words to describe death, a state he believes is peacefully dark, where the vital flow of body fluids and words is stopped. All is silent and the watcher is at peace; he has no more words. Death is equated finally with the loss of words, the risks they engender, and the understanding they may bring. Darkness, a foreshadowing of the approach of death, also signifies the end of the sentry's thought and his quest for meaning in his life. Ironically, writing which destroys the watcher also releases him from the bondage of his state. He dies, but his manuscript does not; it will affect all who pick it up, read it, and discover the disturbing account of the watcher's experience with words. His very last ones ex-

press the wish that his story will not be forgotten. "Et on découvrirait peut-être, tout contre les fondations [of the wall], comme si elles en faisaient partie, mes pages coupables noircies d'encre" (32).

In the end, the soldier functions as archetypal Adam and Christ. He is Adam twice, first in his fall from the paradise of his youth and in his recollection and longing for a return to this blissful state, second in the loss of the wall, his source of understanding, his "tree of knowledge of good and evil." He is Christ as scapegoat, for with his elimination, his sacrifice, the system is freed from his threat and may return to its placid condition of unrestricted power. The sentry dies, the victim of the system, but not without a struggle against its repression. Finally, he is quite different from the first descriptions the reader has of him. By means of his thought and writing he has learned of the value and power of the word as liberating force. He knows that the surveillance of the wall is absurd, senseless. He also understands that one must make the effort to find meaning and make sense, if possible, of life's absurdities. Writing, the result of self-scrutiny and thought, provides the best means of achieving this end. The written word makes the sentry's story palpable, gives it substance and an enduring quality. Endowed with a life of its own, the soldier's account stands as an ongoing witness of his tragic encounter with the stupidity and horror of the system.

The story ends with question marks, reader spaces which invite the reader to consider what part of himself and how much he owes to others and outside influences, what part, not to be sacrificed, he owes to himself, when and under what circumstances allegiance to a cause is justified. Finally, the watcher's experience urges an assessment of how a life ought to be lived in view of the multiple demands and pressures made on it. Forever open-minded, ambiguous by design, non-judgmental, unwilling to conclude, Brulotte only suggests, leaving closure, if any at all, to the good sense and personal experience of each reader.

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