

## MARIE-HÉLÈNE TESSIER / Of Language: a Lesson from Brother So-and-So

Jean-Paul Desbiens is the author of *Les insolences du frère Untel* (*Impertinences of Brother Anonymous*), which consists of a series of polemical essays, published in the newspaper *Le Devoir*, corroborating with editorialist and politician André Laurendeau, who coined the term *joual* spoken by the youth, as more or less the language of the vanquished. Within the same year the editor of *Les Éditions de l'Homme*, Jacques Hébert (future senator, close colleague of Pierre Elliott Trudeau and founder of Canada World Youth) published the articles in book form. 130,000,000 copies sold in a country where 10,000 was considered a best-seller.

In his essays, Brother Anonymous criticizes the poverty of the spoken language, the lack of vision within the institutions and he denounces the clergy's obscurantism, thus exposing the need for major educational reform. His main critique is the degradation of language due to a lack of political infrastructure to protect the flourishing of French culture and identity. *The Impertinences of Brother Anonymous* is a critical text portending the loss of meaning, at a particular point in time when Quebec was tragically sub-merged by an infinitely more powerful idiom equipped with a stronger system of capture. He deplores the lack of French in advertising and the general media, leaving a language and its culture on the verge of being drowned by American influence. His deep literary love for the French language with which he, as a writer, identified at all levels of his being, is what compelled him to fight against its gradual disappearance. There is no question that this text shaped the modernizing of Quebec.

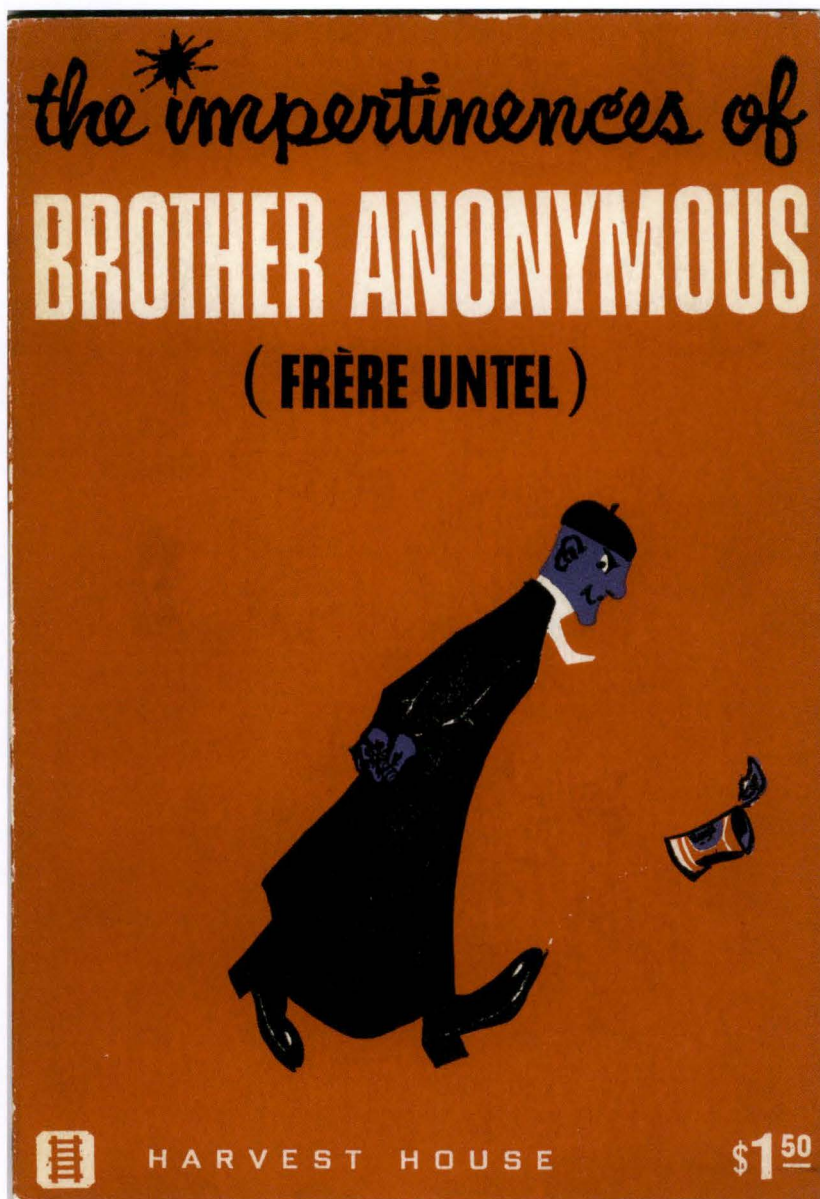
Upon his return from further studies in Rome in 1964, he was invited to join Minister Paul-Guérin Lajoie as his main counsel in regards to the creation of an entire new curriculum in liberal arts, with mandatory classes in philosophy and literature, to be implemented in the new CEGEP, a two-year program preparing students for university, still in existence today. He also went on to become the editor in chief of the *Journal La Presse* in 1970 where he is known for his federalist views. It is also obvious that his thoughts on the necessary banning of English signage influenced greatly the Official Language Act in Quebec, and later, Bill 101, defining French as the language spoken by the majority of the population, as the only official language of Quebec and framing fundamental language rights for everyone in the province. Jean-Paul Desbiens received the honours of Chevalier de l'Ordre national du Québec and was made an Officer of the Order of Canada. He died in July 2006 and we celebrate this year the fiftieth anniversary of his manifesto.

When I was asked to look into *Refus Global* in the context of this issue of *TCR*, I revisited the manifesto written in 1948 by painter Paul-Emile Borduas and signed by the Automatists painters and other intellectuals. Although I was moved by its very innovative lyrical qualities, the anti-clergy content, its critique of society and its sincere cry for the emancipation of the culture, it did not represent, in my understanding, the precursor of what is called the Quiet Revolution but had more influence within the already specific and sophisticated discourse on modern art happening in Quebec, which closely related in time and content with New York's abstract expressionism. Borduas mentions ten years later from his flat in Paris, somewhat disillusioned, that its energetic proclamation was rather personal, naïve, and not strong enough to be revolutionary. So I found it difficult to reinterpret its original dynamism and give it a second breath. As a result, I chose to explore a lesser known manifesto that is *The Impertinences of Brother Anonymous*, which is also less mystified, but extremely influential and closer to my own research.

By focusing on the chapters on language, I wanted to present this manifesto as an important document about the pollution, the noise, the interference, the snow, the bad reception, the gap, the compromised, the foreign particles, words falling off the page, discontinuities, a voice, a sound, a music, submersion, immersion, implosion, buried, forgotten, overpowered, bullied, domination, victim syndrome, auto-da-fé, a lack of response, a defeat, a let's-be-practical, a lack of spine, a lack of destiny, a sigh, a sellout, a caprice, a pile of lost love letters, a vocation, a resistance, a strong belief, a baby boom, a beat generation, an alarm clock, an axe, a *je ne sais quoi*.... And contrary to common opinion still circulating today, someone who defends the protection of French language as a cultural identity in Quebec is not necessarily a nationalist, a separatist, neither a fascist nor a racist.

Finally, in order to bring the author's main ideas into the foreground of contemporary critique, I chose to reproduce a series of excerpts relating to the deterioration of language so as to understand the mechanisms into which any speech, and therefore any thought process, can be reduced, alienated, and self-abased. I wanted to play with the effect of visual poverty, the impact of multinational repetition in our visual landscape, not only in the 1960s Quebec, but today, globally, all language confounded. In order to illustrate my point, I replaced the word *joual* with the words *Starbucks*, *7-Eleven*, and *Safeway*. In my opinion this gesture does not weaken or hijack but rather reinforces Desbiens's thesis.





The cover of *The Impertinences of Brother Anonymous* published in Montreal by Harvest House in 1962. Courtesy W.D. Jordan Special Collections and Music Library, Queen's University.

WE SPEAK  
STARBUCKS  
BECAUSE OUR SOULS ARE IMPOVERISHED  
AND SO WE LIVE  
7-ELEVEN

**TO SPEAK STARBUCKS  
IT IS TO SAY STARBUCKS  
INSTEAD OF COFFEE SHOP. THE ABSENCE OF  
LANGUAGE THAT IS THE 7-ELEVEN SPEECH IS A  
SYMPTOM OF OUR INEXISTENCE. NO ONE CAN  
EVER STUDY LANGUAGE ENOUGH AS IT IS THE  
HOME OF ALL MEANINGS**

NOW WE APPROACH THE HEART OF THE PROBLEM  
WHICH IS A PROBLEM OF CIVILIZATION  
PEOPLE SPEAK STARBUCKS  
BECAUSE THEY THINK 7-ELEVEN  
AND THEY THINK SAFEWAY BECAUSE THEY LIVE  
STARBUCKS

**LANGUAGE IS PUBLIC PROPERTY**  
AND THE STATE SHOULD PROTECT IT AS SUCH  
AS IT PROTECTS MOOSE AND TROUT  
AND AS IT PROTECTS NATIONAL PARKS  
AND ALL PUBLIC DOMAINS AS IT SHOULD  
SO AN EXPRESSION IS JUST AS GOOD AS A MOOSE

**A WORD IS WORTH  
JUST AS MUCH AS A TROUT**

**OUR PEOPLE KEEP THEIR ADMIRATION FOR  
MACHINES AND TECHNIQUE  
THEY ARE IMPRESSED BY NOTHING  
BUT MONEY AND LUXURY  
THE GRACES OF SYNTAX DO NOT INTEREST THEM**

WE WORRY A LOT  
ABOUT RADIOACTIVE FALLOUT  
BUT WE PAY NO ATTENTION TO  
PHILOSOPHICAL FALLOUT  
YET WE ARE CONSTANTLY SPRINKLED  
WITH PHILOSOPHY

PHILOSOPHY TOUCHES EVERY ONE OF US  
IT IS IN THE NAME OF PHILOSOPHY  
THAT FOURTEEN MILLION RUSSIANS ARE SENT TO SIBERIA  
THAT SIX MILLION JEWS WERE GASED

PHILOSOPHY  
ALWAYS CATCHES UP WITH HUMANS  
WHETHER THEY DO NOT THINK ABOUT IT —  
AND MAYBE ABOVE ALL IF THEY DO NOT  
THINK ABOUT IT

THE LANGUAGE OF REASON IS AUSTERE  
BUT IT LEADS TO FREEDOM  
WHICH IS NEVER OUTSIDE KNOWLEDGE  
WHICH IN TURN MEASURES THE DEGREE OF OUR FREEDOM

DUHAMEL SAYS THAT A PEOPLE THAT READS  
IS A SAVED PEOPLE  
THINK BY YOURSELF!

CULTURE  
IS THE FOUNDATION OF ONE'S LIFE  
THERE IS INEXHAUSTIBLE PLEASURE IN CULTURE  
BUILD WITHIN YOURSELF A WEALTH YOU CAN TAKE WITH YOU  
WHICH NO ONE CAN EVER TAKE AWAY FROM YOU  
YOUR OWN THINKING BELONGS TO YOU



I AM CONVINCED THERE IS NO SUBSTANTIAL DIFFERENCE  
BETWEEN THE DEGRADATION OF OUR LANGUAGE  
AND THE SLACKNESS OF OUR ATTITUDE  
TOWARDS THE FUNDAMENTAL LIBERTIES

**IF WE ARE TO BE CURED FROM SPEAKING STARBUCKS,  
ENERGETIC MEASURES ARE CALLED FOR. THE AXE!  
WE MUST WORK WITH THE AXE!**

- a) **Absolute control of the media. DEATH PENALTY  
for using STARBUCKS speech**
- b) **DESTRUCTION by Provincial Police of all business  
SIGNS in 7-ELEVEN or SAFEWAY**
- c) **For two years, the right to SHOOT at sight any  
officials, any cabinet minister, any professor, any  
priest who utters STARBUCKS or 7-ELEVEN or  
SAFEWAY**

**WE TALK STARBUCKS  
WE LIVE 7-ELEVEN  
WE THINK SAFEWAY**

**WE MUST ACT AT THE LEVEL OF CIVILIZATION  
WILL YOU SAY  
I AM GOING BACK TO THE DAYS OF THE FLOOD  
IF I RECALL BERGSON'S WORDS  
FOR THE NEED FOR A SOUL SUPPLEMENT?**

**AN INDIVIDUAL MUST CARRY HIS REASONS FOR  
LIVING FOR A LONG TIME  
BEFORE HIS REASONS CAN CARRY HIM.  
AT FIRST, EVERYTHING IS ONLY AN UNFOLDING IN  
THE NIGHT,  
A FREEDOM WON IN ANGUISH**

*"The one who gives most to contemporary issues is someone who does not even try to answer them. It is what he finds deep within himself, for himself, which has the possibility to reach others and become the topical remedy and the essential nutrient."*

—Henri de Lubac, *Nouveaux paradoxes*

**FIRST PRIZE  
ONE WEEK IN TORONTO  
SECOND PRIZE  
TWO WEEKS IN TORONTO  
THIRD PRIZE  
THREE WEEKS IN TORONTO**

*"I never thought about it,  
says Mauriac,  
but there is nothing more rare and threatening  
than a man who thinks out loud  
even though what he says  
is nothing else than what he sees  
and only sees what is obvious for all  
but the evidence itself of what he denounces  
makes him a **THREAT**"*