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The Social and Cultural Context of Inuit Literary History

Inuit literature already has a specific place in world heritage, since it is seen as a testimony of the possibility for man to live in the toughest conditions¹. *Written* Inuit literature is more particular: it develops at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century, at a time when books and magazines are challenged by new media and new publication forms. It shares with other native artistic expressions a strong political meaning, considered either postcolonial or, as some suggest, not yet postcolonial. It also conveys rich oral and sculptural traditions, in its inventive new ways of making literature. However, as the few researchers on this literature point out, Inuit works received no or little critical attention, and they are almost never part of university curriculum (Kennedy). All these facts combine to form a fascinating case for research, which poses considerable methodological challenges.

Nunavik Inuit literature, which appears to be both part of a greater Inuit whole (including Nunavut, Greenland, Northwest Territories) and exclusive in its situation – at the crossroads between Inuktitut, English and French languages – poses specific challenges to the literary historian.

The objective of this article is to examine some of the parameters within which we can think of a first historical interpretation of the evolution of written literature in Nunavik, the Inuit region of Québec, which, as of 1959, signals the beginning of a written self-representation of the Inuit.

1. Inuit literary and cultural contexts

Inuktitut, which is considered by linguists as one of the most complex languages, has been in written form for just over one hundred and fifty years², which explains its

1 For example, critics of the first translations of Inuit literature in Indian languages, *The Harpoon of the Hunter* in Marathi and Hindi, demonstrate the universality of Inuit culture, beyond the difficulties of translation and the gap between social situations. See for example Apoorva Puranik, 2016.

2 For an account of the development of written Inuktitut, see Ken Harper, 1983.

short linguistic³ and literary history. Although not endangered, compared to most native minority languages in North America, Inuktitut survives in part thanks to the work of dynamic organizations, like the Avataq Cultural Institute in Québec⁴. Inuktitut plays a significant role in maintaining a strong, distinct identity and culture among the Inuit⁵. According to Noel McDermott, literature in Inuktitut has a future, but “encouragement and support” will be needed to ensure that Inuktitut writers “get their work published and distributed” (Langgård and Thisted 237).

As early as in the 1930s, a traveler to Nunavik recorded that most Inuit could read and write, despite the lack of a formal educational system. Written Inuktitut was then mainly used for religious ceremonies. Since pen and paper were difficult to obtain, like any other manufactured material, Inuit writing was limited as a result. The scarce presence of trees, the fragility of caribou and seal skins left little to write on: carvings made of bones or stones sometimes allowed oral traditions to be kept in a material, symbolic form.

Even if Inuit from all territories share a common linguistic base, the large number of dialects and the lack of a standardized language among the Inuit of Nunavut, Nunatsiavut, Nunavik and Greenland makes it difficult to exchange written texts in Inuktitut among Inuit men and women. Furthermore, the use of two writing systems, syllabic form in Nunavik and in parts of Nunavut, and Roman orthography for others, poses a considerable challenge to cultural and literary exchanges.

The retention rate of Inuit language is among the highest of Indigenous peoples of the Americas: 80% of Inuit in Nunavut and 90% in Nunavik speak Inuktitut (McDermott 225). That being said, and partly because of the difficulty of linguistic exchanges between Inuit, most writers in Canada choose English as the language of literary writing. A number of texts are written and published in Inuktitut, and to a lesser extent, in Nunavik, in French. Greenland has a longer literary tradition, and it publishes a larger number of texts and books. A substantial proportion of it is in Greenlandic (the rest being in Danish).

3 The first complete Nunavik Inuktitut dictionary was completed by Taamusi Quamaq and published in 1990 as “The Real Inuit Words”.

4 Founded in 1980, Avataq received its mandate from the “elders” of Nunavik. Today, the Institute has a complete range of programs and services, including: an Inuktitut promotion and preservation program, a genealogy program, a Nunavik museums program, a Nunavik Inuit art collection, an archaeology department, an artist support program, a documentation and archives center, local cultural committees, traditional skills courses, as well as a research and publications service. [<http://www.avataq.qc.ca/en/Institute/About-us/Background-Information>, July 2012].

5 See for example Jean-Philippe Chartrand, 1986.

Traditionally, Inuit value narratives to convey their lifestyle, legends and even historical facts, sometimes dating back hundreds of years. According to Nunavik writer and filmmaker Zebedee Nungak, “amazingly, the human memory served as an archive for these [stories].” Nungak considers that “one of the strongest traditions of Inuit has been the preservation of culture and identity through *unikkaat* (stories) and *unikkaatuat* (legends)” (62).

Some oral literary forms are specific to Inuit; this is the case for what Nungak calls “daily narrative”. He writes:

Another feature of Inuit daily life was the “daily narrative”. The family would re-group at the end of the day, and recount the events and happenings of the day. A natural extension of this forum was the reciting of legends and stories by the more elderly members of the family (62).

The integration in daily life of “fiction”, as Western culture would call it, is the convergence of talking about daily life and storytelling.

The reader will also note that Inuit stories (both from Nunavik and from Greenland) demonstrate a specific conception of time compared to Western narratives. In Taamusi Quamaq’s book (2010), for example, a chapter begins with a return to the events described in the previous chapter, a clear sign of a trace of orality. A different time conception also appears in the fragmented narratives and the multiplication of literary forms (eg. Kelly Berthelsen), in which the book is the focal center of a multiplicity of time scales and perspectives, which can confuse the reader but demonstrate the characteristic use of literature by Inuit writers.

Most practiced written literary forms resemble those of aboriginal people, comprised mainly of tales and legends, but also of journalistic essays, dictionaries and life stories, some novels, children’s literature and poetry, and – more rarely – theatrical plays.

Regardless, Inuit culture today seems in danger of survival: according to Markoosie, author of the first Inuit novel in Canada, *Harpoon of the Hunter*, “much of our oral history has been lost or no longer told by those who possess such knowledge of our past” (37).

However, much remains to be done to integrate written literature in Inuit cultural habits, and to adapt the forms to their ways. In addition to the usual difficulties of young writers, an Inuit writer faces a series of additional pitfalls. According to Nungak,

Since Inuit traditions are oral and not literary, Inuit have had to process through a transition to find a suitable “zone of comfort” in the field of written literature. In past times, writing seemed to be something for “others” to do, and was not at all a pre-occupation of Inuit. For a long time, it seemed that Inuit were neither meant, nor expected to be, writers.

That is, in the way that *Qallitnaat* [white men] have been authors, poets, and producers of written works for centuries (64).

Today, writers such as Zebedee Nungak have developed a satirical style that is part of an assertion of a political identity and a post-colonial position. Others such as Taqralik Partridge have developed an art midway between performance, poetry and spoken word, thus keeping the oral tradition alive into a renewed and urban art form. It is interesting to note that Taqralik Partridge's works are mainly published via short videos on YouTube, the best way to reach Inuit people according to the artist, who nevertheless also writes and publishes stories. She won a prize for the best short story written in English in 2010 (Rogers 3).

The absence of a publisher or literary magazine in Nunavik and Nunavut, and the fact that there is still no geographic center for Inuit cultural and literary consecration, keep the development of a literary life fragile. The challenges and the failings of the education system exacerbate this fragility. Even today, only a minority of Inuit complete their basic schooling, while a tiny fraction of them succeed in obtaining a graduate degree. The significant demand for skilled labour allows Inuit graduates to easily obtain a professional job, leaving few of educated people to develop a cultural and literary life.

Yet Inuit authors have been writing for half a century. In doing so, they have been facing steep obstacles. They have long been unrecognized and overlooked. In 1985, Margaret Harry asked: "Where are the Indian and Inuit writers? Many white Canadians, including those who consider themselves well read, cannot name a single Indian or Inuit writer" (Harry 146). Today, twenty-five years later, Harry's remarks still apply, despite a few exceptions.

2. Nunavik cultural situation

Inuit are one of the few aboriginal people who live in many territories, covering all the Arctic and including Siberia, Alaska, Northwest Territories, Nunavut, Yukon, Nunavik, Nunatsiavut and Greenland. In Greenland, Canada and Alaska, they are about 150,000. In Nunavik, Québec's northern region, they are 14,000. The population of Nunavik is among the youngest in Québec: one person in two is less than 20 years old.

The Inuit of North America are not, strictly speaking, Native Americans, although they are an Indigenous people; their ancestors are generally believed to have come to America several thousand years after the arrival of Native Americans. For the Cree and Innu (historically called Montagnais) peoples, Nunavik's Inuit represent the first wave of immigrants to America, followed by the Vikings, French, and English a few decades later. However, the same political questions

arise concerning the Inuit and Indians. The largest land claim process in Canada's history led, in 1999, to the creation of Nunavut, a territory designed as the new home for much of Canada's Inuit. In addition, to honour the claims of the Inuit of Nunavik, in Arctic Quebec, the Quebec government created the Kativik Regional Government under the Convention of James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement, creating the region of Nunavik. This agreement, signed in 1975⁶, was followed by the official recognition by the Quebec government as early as 1983 (one of the only governments to have ever done so) that "the aboriginal people of Quebec are distinct nations that are entitled to their culture, their language, their customs and traditions and to the right to orient themselves the development of their own identity"⁷.

European influence on the Inuit is considerable: first by the imposition of a social and economic system that was foreign to their society, then by the appearance of new diseases and by an abandonment of traditional culture, which resulted in social and family problems, but also in an increase in living standards and education. These improvements also show serious inequality and cultural loss and lead to an adaptation to new modes of dissemination of culture and knowledge: sculpture, drawing and lithography, and finally written literature and cinema.

The political, military and cultural presence of non-natives among the Inuit has clearly had an impact; however, today, the Inuit are fighting to keep and adapt their ways in order to preserve their distinct culture: they are encouraging the teaching and speaking of Inuktitut, the preservation of values and stories about the past, the use of various forms of modern communication (radio, television and the Internet) as well as the development of oral practices (song, spoken word, etc.) and, of course, written literature.

If it manages to keep its language, an Inuit community continues to share a strong common heritage with other Inuit populations, even if its inhabitants speak it with great variations, often due to loans from various European languages: English, French, Danish and German. They therefore have a shared language base, but they practice it with differences according to their geographical location. On the other hand, communities that lose the ability to communicate in Inuktitut (mostly towards English) also diminish their ability to exchange with other Inuit around the Arctic.

6 For more information on the Convention, see Alain-G. Gagnon and Guy Rocher, 2002.

7 This statement was followed in 1985 by the "Motion portant sur la reconnaissance des droits des Autochtones", voted at the Assemblée nationale du Québec on March 15th, 1985. See: *Amérindiens et Inuits. Portraits des nations autochtones du Québec*. Secrétariat aux affaires autochtones, Gouvernement du Québec, 2009, p. 10.

Due to the extension of southern political and cultural powers and influence on the Arctic and the establishment of separate regional administrative structures, most Inuit created a double identity for themselves: Pan-Inuit and regional, in parallel to a commitment (which varies depending on their situation) towards the states to which they are linked.

From the outside, the Inuit represent, for European culture and philosophy, the image of man in front of the essential, a living witness of asceticism which would be natural, and not cultural, as Michel Onfray demonstrates in his essay *Esthétique du pôle Nord* (2002). This leads to the universal recognition of Inuit human and cultural experience, but also to a folklorisation of Inuit culture and values, weighted by the concept of "authenticity". For example, if anthropologists have been very interested in Inuit communities, their special attention has left behind contemporary forms of expressions, often a product of a mixed heritage. The work of Nunavik writer Markoosie clearly illustrates this effect: his traditional novel *Harpoon of the Hunter*⁸ received great reviews and was published in book format in several languages, while his other novel, *Wings of Mercy*⁹, which describes the life of a plane pilot in the Arctic, was never published as a book. If they want to survive, the Inuit need to strongly defend their right to modernity (Chartier 2005), which necessarily implies the right to create new, hybrid and cross-cultural cultural forms.

Regarding the Inuit territory in Quebec, Nunavik is particularized by a striking demographic and economic growth (which does not eliminate serious social problems, including a high suicide rate, violence and unemployment), by a very high level of use of the Inuktitut language and a singular trilingual context, with French, English and Inuktitut.

3. The concept of "written text" in Nunavik Inuit culture

Among the Nunavik Inuit, the concept of "written text" arises from the introduction of writing by Edmund James Peck in 1877 (Evans), and it was not until a few decades ago, at the end of the twentieth century, that the first signs of written Inuit literature became visible.

The establishment of a Western education system (1932: 1st mission school; 1949: 1st federal school; 1963: School Board of New-Quebec) has increased the

8 The Inuktitut (French/Inuktitut) edition of this text. *Le harpon du chasseur*, was published by Les Presses de l'Université du Québec, coll. "Imaginaire | Nord Jardin de givre", 2011 [1969].

9 Published in 5 parts in *Inuktitut Magazine*, from Summer 1972 to Autumn 1973.

knowledge of writing, but primarily for the benefit of a foreign language: English. It was only after 1978 that Inuktitut was offered in schools.

During this transition period, "written text" had a symbolic place, linked to an external power (often religious), in a world that was previously based on orality. However, the appropriation of writing by the Inuit gradually led to the appearance of the first texts, scattered in newspapers and periodicals, and – for some – in the form of books.

These precious early texts mark the beginning of self-representation of the Inuit and a way to preserve their heritage. *Inuktitut Magazine*, first published in 1959, signaled the beginning of an Inuit written literature in Nunavik. The first literary works written by Inuit – including *The Harpoon of the Hunter*, which has just been republished and which was the first Inuit novel in Canada in 1969 – are a blend of forms that draw on both Inuit oral heritage and Western written literary tradition. According to some critics, such a blend diminishes the "authenticity" of the narrative: what the novel gains in formal innovation and literariness, it loses in representativeness of authentic culture. To avoid this problem, Inuit writers have no choice but to assert their right to create works in the same way as writers from all other modern cultures: through a meshing of self and other.

4. Inuit literary history methodology

Inuit literature grounds its interest and relevance not so much by the quantity of its productions than by the fact that it constitutes a symbol that has universal value for human experience. For the Inuit, including Markoosie, this commitment takes the form of a duty of memory, which shows how it is now necessary to communicate through writing in order to transmit their vision of the world.

As Clara Mongeon-Bourbonnais demonstrated in her literary study of Zebedee Nungak (from Nunavik), Inuit literature – like many other colonial literatures – is overwhelmed by the figure of the "Other", which can be understood by the figure of the "Qallunaat". This figure appears in the first Inuit texts as a surprise (Qumaq), fear, threat, and then in a continual challenge that must be discarded (Nungak) and overcome (Berthelsen).

From a methodological standpoint, it is tempting to apply the excellent work done on Canadian and American First Nations literature to Inuit literature, partly because these studies are particularly fertile and abundant. However, if it is possible to consider these studies in an understanding of Inuit literature, one must also remember to apply them with caution because of fundamental differences between Inuit and First Nations (or Native Americans). It is true that Inuit culture shares with First Nations cultures an oral origin, certain identity themes and

a postcolonial perspective. However, Inuit culture differentiates itself on many fronts, including legal, historical, cultural, geographic and linguistic ones:

- First, the Inuit of Canada, unlike the First Nations, were never subject to the *Indian Act*;
- Because of their remoteness and isolation, the notion of hybridity, which correctly applies to varying degrees to the First Nations, had a different and lesser impact among the Inuit;
- Canada's Inuit are part of a larger whole: they belong to a people living in territories of different jurisdictions in five countries: mainly in Nunavik, Nunavut and Greenland, but also in Nunatsiavut (Labrador), in the Northwest Territories, Alaska and Siberia;
- This situation contributes to the existence of a pan-Inuit identity, intellectually defended by Greenlandic Aqaluk Lyngé¹⁰, but also to regional differences, accentuated by the establishment of institutions specific to areas administered by the Inuit;
- Finally, the Inuit share a common linguistic background, beyond their differences. Also, unlike most of the First Nations who have difficulty maintaining their languages, Inuktitut remains strong among communities and is used in contemporary culture.

From a literary point of view, the literature of Nunavik displays some characteristics of a so-called minor literature (a concept developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari¹¹), and redeveloped by Jean Bessière), which is a literature written in the same language as that of a literature of greater importance: for Nunavik, this is the case of Greenland, literarily well-endowed, with over 100 publications a year.

As Nelly Duviçq demonstrated in her PhD thesis, the concept of "postcolonialism" is not generally accepted by Inuit authors and critics: first, they reject the fact that they live in a *post-colonial* society, since they do not control their own political and social destiny; second, they believe that Inuit literature must be understood from its own sources, without reference to external concepts (such as postcolonialism), which are often applied without consideration of the particular situation of the Inuit.

Within Canada, each Inuit region eventually developed institutions that account for its own peculiarities, which has implications from a cultural, linguistic

10 His poetry clearly speaks about this desire to perceive Inuit identity as a whole: *Taqqaq uummannut aqutaannut takorluukkat apuuffiannur / The Veins of the Heart to the Pinnacle of the Mind*, 2008; *Des veines du cœur au sommet de la pensée*, 2012 [2008].

11 *Kafka. Pour une littérature mineure*, Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1975.

and literary perspective. For example, Keavy Martin chose to study only the literary productions of Nunavut in his PhD thesis (2009). In the case of Nunavik, this difference is accentuated, as previously mentioned, by the fact that it is the only Inuit territory at the confluence of three languages in which texts are produced and published: Inuktitut, English and French.

In conclusion, and from a methodological point of view, the Nunavik corpus has characteristics that differ from other Inuit territories, but also others that make it part of a larger body. Moreover, one can find useful concepts for understanding Inuit literature in the numerous studies on Native American literature, but these must be carefully adjusted because of the unique characteristics of this culture.

5. Conclusion

Since the work of Margaret Harry and, more recently, that of Keavy Martin, we can see how the Indigenous literatures and especially Inuit literature pose a reception problem that questions the rules found elsewhere in the process of establishing literary aesthetic judgments (Chartier, 2000). Harry found that, in many cases, Indigenous and Inuit literatures are evaluated through a critical process of ignorance or praise which does not consider the aesthetic value of the works. However, a unique literary aesthetic exists: it can be found in the origin (both oral and visual), the context (both pan-Inuit and regional), and in the preferred forms (both short stories and autobiography) of Inuit literature. This Inuit literary aesthetic is characterized, as Karen Langgård and Kirsten Thisted have recently shown in the circumpolar context, by a postmodern voice (which includes forms that combine the written and the oral, like spoken word, songs, web videos, and multimedia blogs). An Inuit literary history might also require its own literary theory, as Langgård suggests in the context of her own research on Greenlandic literature. I believe this situation calls for considerations relating to the social and cultural context of Nunavik, the transition from oral to written and oral persistence in writing, literary reception issues which blur the reading and the appreciation of texts, and finally, an analysis of the recurrence and the originality of certain literary forms, including the presence of autobiography and postmodern feminist and gender perspectives. All these issues justify the necessity of a broad questioning of literary history methodology in order to take into account the specificity of Inuit literature.

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