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François-Marc Gagnon, *Jean Paul Riopelle and the Automatiste Movement*, transl. by Donald Winkler. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020. 224pp. 77 color illustrations. $49.95 CAD (hb). ISBN 9-78-0228001157.

Review by Roald Nasgaard, Florida State University.

It was with some enthusiasm that I accepted the invitation to review François-Marc Gagnon's posthumous book, *Jean Paul Riopelle and the Automatiste Movement*. Gagnon, who died in 2019, was, as we know, a truly distinguished scholar especially committed to the work of the Automatiste movement in Montreal. Those of us also working in the field know how indebted we are to his publications, like *Paul-Émile Borduas: Écrits/Writings 1942-1958* (1978), *Chronique du movement automatiste québéquois 1941-1954* (1998) and to a host of his other books, articles, and exhibition catalogues. His *Paul-Émile Borduas: A Critical Biography* (2013) I described in the book-cover blurb as "the product of thorough and impeccable scholarship and…unsurpassed in its comprehensiveness and detail."[1] I have always had great respect for Gagnon's writings and have often consulted and cited them.

Then, too, there was the subject matter, the Automatistes, about whose work Claude Gauvreau had proclaimed in 1946: "At last!, Canadian painting exists." This was to say that the Automatistes were the first Canadians to seize the flow of the life stream of modern art, to divert it from Europe to Montreal, and therewith put themselves at the centre of evolving historical developments. This is, of course, well-trodden territory, but I looked forward to discovering in Gagnon's book not only a deft revisit with this seminal period in Canadian art history, but a crowning achievement of sorts, the final summing up of his many years of scholarly research and aesthetic observations, enriched by new insights and observations.

Jean Paul Riopelle and the Automatiste Movement is beautifully designed and produced. It is published under the name of François-Marc Gagnon (translated by Donald Winkler), and, I assume that, coming from McGill-Queen's, it has also been peer reviewed. It draws richly from newspaper reviews, critical texts, and letters, several of which, in their fulness, are translated into English for the first time. Yet, as I am sorry to report, I find it a very perplexing work, inadequate in too many instances, and to me it doesn't add up as a finished book, one to which Gagnon would have given his imprimatur. Its narratives and its arguments are too often delivered without adequate explanatory historical context, at one moment seeming to address a lay reader, and at others assuming a fully informed specialist one. Quoted passages are too often read merely cursorily, inattentive to the full range of their implications. Chapters often veer off on tangents that are dead ends or simply lose sight of Riopelle altogether. There is considerable intellectual

overthinking, especially on Riopelle's using the notion of total chance, when more often a straightforward look at the works of art themselves would have clarified matters.

This propensity to overthink and underlook also undermines the coherence of the last chapter on Riopelle and Pollock. This I find particularly puzzling given that Gagnon had already, quite sophisticatedly, dealt on earlier occasions not only with the Riopelle-Pollock relationship but with many of the other issues the book tackles, including in the short entries on individual paintings that he wrote for the Heffel Fine Art Auction House, collected in a book format in 2014. Does *Jean Paul Riopelle and the Automatiste Movement* show Gagnon to have regressed in the sharpness of his thinking in the meantime? Or are there other explanations? There are issues in Gagnon's earlier writing on which I might have challenged him. But when it comes to this book, I am not sure with whom I would really be debating. Whose book is this really?

The publisher's note at the end of the book's general introduction tells us that "François-Marc Gagnon submitted his manuscript for publication, but unfortunately, illness prevented him from guiding this project to completion" (p. 4). Following his death, the press then asked "his friend and colleague, Gilles Lapointe, professor of art history at the University of Québec to take in hand the book's editorial revision" (p. 4). Further credits are given to Genette Michaud, Yseult Riopelle, and Janine Carreau for "help in the refinement of this work" (p. 4).

The introduction itself is unsigned, but given voice by an anonymous "we," who were faced with the "difficult" task of "the historical reconstruction of this brief episode in [Riopelle's] life" (p. 3). This "we" have restricted themselves to "written sources, to the works themselves, and to the writings and reflections that Riopelle continued to inspire" (p. 3). The "we" then thank a host of earlier biographical studies to which they are indebted, as well as the writings of the Automatistes themselves, including Borduas, Fernand Leduc, Claude Gauvreau, and a number of more contemporary researchers.

Of course, throughout we do hear something of Gagnon's personal voice, certainly the conversational tone that we know from his lectures--which we can watch on YouTube--the question-and-answer dialogues, a little rambling at times, the occasional discursive turning away from the main subject when following other long trains of thought to wherever they may lead. And the speculative tone exemplified by "let's talk this through." Other portions of the text are more intricately scholarly. The book therefore rather seems like a patchwork collage that, as much as it may be by François-Marc Gagnon, has been a posthumous committee project, its editors beginning from where? From a sketchy submission and from transcribed recordings of Gagnon's oral presentations (or notes from them), admixed with Gagnon's more solid academic passages (digressions included), to which, boosted by additional research and long quotations, they have given firmer structure, but not a consistent texture or a convincing overall connective tissue. Gagnon's earlier published writings on Riopelle, including his eBook *Jean Riopelle: Life & Work* for the Art Canada Institute seem not to have been consulted.

Jean Paul Riopelle and the Automatiste Movement can then only problematically, except in its parts, be attributed to Gagnon. Yet here it is published, and on bookstore shelves. To review it, out of respect for François-Marc's past work, I will therefore address my critique, not to François-Marc, but simply to what I will call the "Book" and its "Editors."

But first a little housekeeping. The book title speaks of the "Automatiste" movement, using French terminology and reflecting the name "Automatisme" that the group gave to their first exhibition at the Galerie du Luxembourg in Paris in June-July 1946, and therewith themselves. Winkler's translation throughout uses the French adjective "Automatiste," but the English noun "Automatism" to name its creative procedures. "Automatism" throughout is capitalized whether it refers specifically to the Canadian movement or to more general Surrealist methodology. In the latter case, the Editors might have followed *The Automatiste Revolution: Montreal 1941-1960* that chose, for clarity, to retain the French noun, "Automatiste," capitalized, only for the Canadians and the English noun, automatism, in lower case, to designate generic automatism.[2]

The Book's title, *Jean Paul Riopelle and the Automatiste Movement*, implies that its subject matter is Riopelle's interaction with his Montreal fellows, and his subsequent abandonment, as the introduction says, of "the group, its concepts of painting, and its ideas" (p. 3). And indeed, it begins with his youthful student years with Henri Bisson whose dictums about copying nature exactly Riopelle had to unlearn once he began to study with Paul-Émile Borduas at the École du meuble. The story then moves into the so-called alley studio where, alongside Marcel Barbeau and Jean-Paul Mousseau, Riopelle made his first Automatiste works, culminating in his glorious watercolours with their background patchwork of colour overlaid with spidery networks of black lines. Riopelle's own story is told close-up, but when it comes to the larger Automatiste group, the Editors drop us into it *in medias res*, as if we were already intimate to its details and to Montreal of the 1940s. A reader in the third decade of the twenty-first century, especially an anglophone one, might have benefitted from a sentence or two of explanation. Why did Riopelle choose to attend the École du meuble? How did it fit into the larger educational system? Why not the École des Beaux-Arts, like other future Automatistes like Pierre Gauvreau, Fernand Leduc, and Françoise Sullivan? When we first encounter the latter, it is in a one sentence list of the names of the students who participated in Borduas' Tuesday meetings at his studio, with little further elaboration.

This absence of context becomes a recurring problem. Riopelle's alley studio fellow workers, except for a little biographic detail, remain largely shadows, leaving Riopelle's work to be seen in isolation. There is no discussion of how they interacted, no comparative look at their work. There is essentially no visual attention at all. There is a reproduction of a Barbeau work on paper from 1946, but there is no textual reference to it; nothing by Mousseau, for example. Chapter eleven reproduces two 1946 works by Pierre Gauvreau, but only because Riopelle had taken some of his paintings to Paris in 1948 with the purpose of having them exhibited, which never happened. Then another picayune example, perhaps: whereas the Book maintains that Riopelle "alone among the Automatistes practiced Decalcomania" (p. 59), endnote six in chapter four "confirms the presence of decalcomanias by [both] Riopelle and Marcel Barbeau" in the 1946 Amherst Street exhibition.

The Book throughout is good at listing the exhibitions in which Riopelle participated and in trying to figure out which specific works were included. But it mostly avoids seeing them. The best it can say of *Hochelaga* (1947) is that it is "composed exclusively of cells that are juxtaposed" (p. 53). The only concession to formal analysis and to thinking about larger art historical contexts is a brief quote from my book, *The Automatiste Revolution*, that speaks of the "implied Cubist grid that governs the formal order" of the painting (p. 53). But there are no follow-ups as to the implications of Analytic Cubism to the work of the later 1940s. Hence the Book's misunderstanding of the function of the black-arc brush strokes of *Le perroquet vert* (1949): that

their repetitions are merely signs of the constraints of the unconscious gesture that, as the Editors later have it "can only endlessly repeat" (p. 120), thus missing entirely their fundamental structural function. Riopelle himself was acutely aware of his debt to Cubism. In 1948 he refers back to 1911, the high moment of Cubism "better studied in NY than Paris" (p. 41). In his text for the *Véhémences confrontées* poster in 1951, just when his paintings had definitively abandoned their Cubist underpinnings, he describes the Cubist "experiment" deprecatingly as "an absence of daring" that explains "the lingering need to shuttle between the figurative and the non-figurative" (p. 121).

Hence the book's failure to seize that pivotal moment at the end of the decade when Riopelle dissolves his formal grid-based structures to embrace subsequently another less determinate *gestalt*, the results of which would soon lead viewers to read his paintings as evocative of landscape. The moment is captured in Patrick Waldberg's compelling review of Riopelle and Leduc's exhibition at the Galerie Creuse in 1950. Walberg remarks on how in his latest paintings Riopelle's "pictorial imperialism scarcely accommodated the limits imposed by the rectangle," how it would not take much for it "aggressively to carry on to the very walls of the studio, to the roof, to the façade" (p. 91). There is some hyperbole here, but the same sentiment was reiterated in an article by Claude Gauvreau, which the Book does not cite. If Waldberg's implication was that Riopelle's paintings were somehow like American all-over, the Book categorically rejects the notion because, as it insists, Riopelle, unlike Pollock, always worked on stretched canvases and so knew his predetermined limits. But look again at the sort of painting that Waldberg may have seen (8.2, *Sans titre*, 1949-50): the paint pushes the edges, is hardly contained by them, overlaps them in thick globs, the composition inwardly held together by the diagonal overlay of thickly, violently applied slashes of paint.

This was also the sort of painting that Riopelle showed in Michel Tapié's exhibition *Véhémences confrontées*, which juxtaposed contemporary European with American art. And it was on the exhibition poster that Riopelle published his statement defining/describing his conception of "total chance," footnoting it with a telling quotation from Nietzsche: that "what you call 'chance' is yourselves who are what happens to you and what is inflicted on you."

Total chance is an ambiguous concept in that it equates total chance with real control driven by the painter's biological nature. The Book approaches it via Derrida's notion of invisibility, or the moment of blindness when the palette knife bears down on top of the paint freshly squeezed from the tube, when the consequences of the act of sliding the knife still remain unknown. The Book reads this statement as a totalizing underlying principle for Riopelle's work during the 1950s to the point where it declares that, by resorting to it Riopelle "avoids any visual control over the effect produced by the first results obtained without preconceived ideas" (p. 127). That may be so. But we should beware once again of being too categorial. Robert Kean's description of Riopelle at work suggests a rather practiced preparation: to hold up several paint tubes in your fist and then to decapitate them with one swoop of the knife takes practice. The tubes of colours would have been prechosen, and the artists, after having seen what had happened hundreds of times before, could predict how they would spread even if briefly hidden by the knife. The Book's centrefold reproduction of *Hommage aux Nymphéas-Pavane* (1954) with its near mirror image side panels and its carefully weighted central one, might suggest that some preplanning had taken place. I mean in no way to deprecate Riopelle or his painting here, but rather the Editors for letting their Book endlessly overthink and underobserve Riopelle's own procedures. As the artist said: "When I begin painting, I go towards an idea, not from one…I have no preconceived idea"

(p. 134). He would begin with an action, the result of which, not entirely predictable, called for a responsive action, which produced another bit of unpredictability to which another, perhaps corrective action would respond, and so on until a final painting resulted, whose appearance would be a new discovery. We are not far from Borduas' 1942 description of his own working method, the basis for the Automatiste procedures that the Book tells us Riopelle, with his "total chance," was abandoning (p. 41).

There are many other issues to deal with, some nit-picky, some not. There are long deviations that end up looking at Duchamp, Man Ray, Giacometti, and prehistoric Pech-Merle cave paintings that tell us little about Riopelle's art, but which the Editors nevertheless richly illustrate. No reference is given to the significance of Claude Monet's Giverny work, which Riopelle was enthusiastically re-discovering in the company of the American Sam Frances, even though the Editors reproduce the painting titled *Hommage aux Nymphéas-Pavanne*. Given how much space the Book gives to Riopelle's career in Paris, it would also have been interesting to have understood better the particular character of Riopelle's painting vis-à-vis that of the French Lyrical Abstract colleagues. How French an artist was he as opposed to a North American one?

The Book's final, almost stand-alone chapter, given over to Riopelle and Pollock, discusses issues like all-over, the consequences of unstretched canvases as opposed to pre-stretched ones, and whether paintings move centrifugally or centripetally. But it remains too unobservant and inconclusive. Whereas the Book contends that Riopelle and Pollock "have very little in common, regardless of what the American critics thought at the time" (p. 181), François-Marc Gagnon, to the contrary, had already quite deftly handled the parallels between the working methods of the two painters: capturing their "affinity" at "a deeper level." This is what he says in a 2014 publication: "One has to realize how the use of the palette knife was as determinant for Riopelle as the drip technique was for Pollock. … In the case of both Pollock and Riopelle, the consciousness of the process of painting was at the maximum."[3] Here, Gagnon draws a clear analogy between how Riopelle deployed his palette knife and Pollock's pouring and dripping. The Editors seem not to have done their homework.

NOTES

[1] François-Marc Gagnon, *Paul-Émile Borduas: A Critical Biography* (Montreal and Kingston; London; Ithaca: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013).

[2] Roald Nasgaard, Ray Ellenwood, *The Automatiste Revolution: Montreal 1941-1960* (Vancouver, Berkeley, CA, and Unionville, ON: Douglas & McIntyre, 2010).

[3] François-Marc Gagnon, *Borduas, Lemieux, Riopelle: essays on three Quebec painters / Borduas, Lemieux, Riopelle: essais sur trois peintres du Québec* (Vancouver: Heffel Fine Art Auction House, 2014), p. 181.

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