



Reado- polis

translated by Oana Avasilichioaei

a novel

Bertrand
Laverdure

Extractor 569 Mima Water



FIRST ENGLISH EDITION

Published originally under the title: *Lectodôme* © Bertrand Laverdure & Le Quartanier, Montreal 2008

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The production of this book was made possible through the generous assistance of the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council. BookThug also acknowledges the support of the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund and the Government of Ontario through the Ontario Book Publishing Tax Credit and the Ontario Book Fund.



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We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada through the National Translation Program for Book Publishing, an initiative of the *Roadmap for Canada's Official Languages 2013–2018: Education, Immigration, Communities*, for our translation activities.

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LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION

Laverdure, Bertrand, 1967–
[Lectodôme. English]

Readopolis / Bertrand Laverdure; Oana Avasilichioaei, translator.
—First English edition.

(Literature in translation series)
Translation of: *Lectodôme*.

Issued in print and electronic formats.
softcover: ISBN 978-1-77166-298-7
html: ISBN 978-1-77166-299-4
pdf: ISBN 978-1-77166-300-7
kindle: ISBN 978-1-771663-01-4

I. Avasilichioaei, Oana, translator II. Title. III. Title: *Lectodôme*.
English IV. Series: Literature in translation series

PS8573.A815L4213 2017 C843.54 C2017-900742-4 C2017-900743-2

PRINTED IN CANADA

He who is born today is meant for a much more intensely intellectual life than he who was born a hundred thousand years ago; and yet, notwithstanding the intensity of his individual life, his intelligence will be found to be, so to speak, much more socialized; precisely because of its being so much richer, it will possess much less for itself alone. It is the same with sensibility.

—JEAN-MARIE GUYAU, *A Sketch of Morality Independent of Obligation or Sanction*, translated by Gertrude Kapteyn

Where shall I find the time to do all this non-reading?

—KARL KRAUS, *Half-Truths & One-and-a-Half Truths: Selected Aphorisms*, translated by Harry Zohn

1.

THE FOUR ACES

I'M RESTING.

Dozing off. Doing nothing, just resting.

All I want is to lie in bed, arms out like a cross, left cheek on the pillow, legs and chest flat on the mattress. I haven't read anything today and won't read anything before one in the afternoon. I am a reader—what publishing houses call “a member of the editorial board.”

Yet there is no editorial board, no summit meeting, no secret gathering to formulate impartial, obvious decisions, ones that are democratic and positive. I am a reader because I have my own view of literature: what it should be; what buttons to sew on a novel's sleeves; what zippers to place throughout a narrative; the ideal length of writers' detestable pipe dreams.

My plight is to rule over the ghosts haunting the world of letters. Deep down, I will always be Hercules standing before the Augean Stables. I devote myself to a soldier's anonymous life. I am sent to the front of others' words, the unbearable, lachrymose bundles of Monsieur Patenaude and Madame Lefebre, Monsieur Hogarteen and Madame Willoska. The unbelievable heap of manuscripts pollutes my consciousness.

Who wouldn't slam into the first wall they see, having realized the sheer madness of human beings, their disrespectful desire to impose all their misfortunes and opinions on us? If it were up to me, I would decree a law against abominable books.

In fact, I abhor all these smooth talkers, these idolaters of the freedom of expression. Okay fine, I get it, people need to express themselves, rejoice, appease their egos, pour out their bitterness, recount their troubles, but then they get it into their heads to publish this Mother of Vinegar, this thick syrup—no, I say! Asinine nonsense. Kill off the whole lot of blowhards, wipe these battalions of human expression off the face of the earth.

I'm resting.

I won't say that I recant, lose my head, sometimes have regrets. But I'm weary, I feel my calm slipping away.

I read because others' torments are part of my labour. I read because the harshest truths and the most ordinary dramas—not to mention extravagant desires—emerge between the clumsy lines of the worst fictions.

Authenticity rests in the clumsiness of writers.

I move only because the earth is round. I lose my temper

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only because talent is everywhere; it is spherical, omnipotent, unstoppable, flimsy, murky.

What do we learn from reading a good book, a book that affects and moves us?

What do we learn, exactly? How does this experience enrich us, help us transcend our daily worries?

Books are archives of our restlessness. We live in the era of *Pax Americana*, a unidirectional democracy imposed as a universal cure. We will use banal terms to write about it in studies read by beings with laser-corrected myopia. We will introduce nuances, avoid making generalizations and cookie-cutter judgments, reductive pronouncements. But we will reach the same conclusion: violence rules the world.

I've been a member of an editorial board for almost six years. I read and read and read, convincing myself that this is a natural extension of my scholarly abilities.

For now, my fridge is half empty, but my determination remains intact.

Because I want to be a knight of nihilism, someone withdrawn from the world, I found a lousy second job that lets me feel sorry for myself.

Three days a week, I work in a Couche-Tard convenience store, so I can honour my obligations as tenant and my small pleasures as cultural consumer.

I am an ideologue, and literature suits this shortcoming perfectly. Literature feeds it and encourages it, disseminates it and indulges it.

* * *

Every reader has an inner commentator who is thrilled to de-

cipher like some fragile material the void that stands between the reader and the words. Champollion is the grandmaster of readers, the admiral.

We erroneously give readers of publishing houses a key role. Honestly, defending this rumour only promotes misinformation.

Language is a code, and literature uses the cogwheels of this code to shape the space-time that choreographs humankind. The first inventors of language are writers, then come the stylists and historians.

Literature, that same old tune, that scuffed and ancient leather bag, still exists, and it is never more present than among its enemies: human indifference, ignorance, and laziness.

I live at 3270 Sherbrooke Street East, apartment 4. I don't read without taking breaks.

Walking is my second vocation. I walk north, south, northeast, southeast, northwest, southwest.

What I seek is a sense of continuity, the effect of a long take. A successful walk is one where I become a spectator, a spy.

My penchant for spying leads me to notice commemorative plaques, posters, torn paper stuck to poles, abandoned newspapers, and recycling bins overflowing with sullied books, pages filled with words.

*This tablet commemorates those in the service
of the Canadian Pacific Railway Company who,
at the call of the king and the country,
endured hardship, faced danger and finally
passed out of sight of men by the path of duty
and self-sacrifice, giving up their own lives*

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*that others might live in freedom,
let those who come after see to it
that their names be not forgotten*

Right next to the former Angus Shops, a brass plaque is affixed to the brick building that now houses CECI (Centre for International Studies and Cooperation). The plaque, more like a bas-relief sculpture, depicts tanks, battleships, planes and cannons, elongated through the effect of perspective, accompanied by cavalry and infantry, captains and commanders. The plaque honours the memory of the CPR workers who lost their lives in World War I.

This plaque is a book. It contains the key lessons we should take from life.

Its presence is no longer noticed; no one stops to contemplate its message. Yet, in just a few lines, we can already read the non-existence of the French-Canadian CPR workers who gave up their innocence for the nation. There's not one French word on the plaque. A unilingual English memorandum, fiercely royalist. The law of economics applied then and still applies now. There is no imperialist grandeur without omission.

This passage now: "endured hardship, faced danger and finally / passed out of sight of men by the path of duty / and self-sacrifice."

Does this not sum up what it means to live among humans?

Now forget a writer's intuition. These lines transcend the brute toil of soldiers, the terse mechanics of orders.

But what exactly do we know about the path of duty and self-sacrifice? We know that it leads to the frontier that conceals us from the sight of others.

If I do not see you, do you still exist?

I was there to catch others' looks, to telescope their field of vision. I surveyed life with appropriate glasses, offering others their tickets to presence. Over time, I started taking notes of the inscriptions I found on my walks, collecting the torn bits of newspaper, trampled brochures, or letters abandoned in the wet grass.

Every morning comes with its harvest of words. Easy pickings every time.

Today, I came home with an entire plaque, a text commemorating the men who sacrificed themselves for the nation.

These spoils were enough.

* * *

Four manuscripts await me on the table.

I ignore them.

The main joy of reading is being idle. We listen to music with no purpose in mind. We occupy time.

Manuscripts are bottles dropped from a sinking ship. They are patient entities.

Authors are definitely not.

Sometimes, the naïveté is touching. Someone in Saint-Rémi or the Town of Mount Royal is waiting. They wait for me. They know that public proceedings have been initiated. Having received their acknowledgement letter, they wait. Solitary or sociable, indifferent or sick, they wait. I listen to their heartbeat, pick up a page, read one line, casually leaf through the manuscript. I look over the cover letter. Read three pages in the middle and two from the end.

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The publishing house gives me two weeks to read four manuscripts, assigning me a quota of pages, always the same, based on what I can do, never more than 150,000 words. A normal human being who lives to the age of eighty-four, well trained, with sound command of the French language and average curiosity, represents approximately 42,000 pages of confessions and diaries. If everyone in the world were to become literate, most tree species would go extinct.

If it were as easy to educate as it is to subjugate, we would have less difficulty imposing goodwill.

I am not particularly keen on reading for the *n*th time a botched historical novel or a detestable true story dripping with so many of the usual homilies that it doesn't hold water.

I've lost count of the horror stories or self-help books, the memoirs and fantastical ravings. Don't take me for a cynic. A novel has no good subject per se. Everything is allowed, everything is acceptable. Let's say it's more a matter of vocation, general knowledge, and practice. In a few paragraphs, I can identify the ignorant and the deranged, the diligent and the dedicated. Everyone has written at least one poem or short story in their life.

Despite my irritation, I believe it's important to take the time to congratulate every person who has completed one or several short stories, a novel, or an essay. Regardless of what happens to these manuscripts, a sensitive explorer stands before you. Don't mock him. Through a curious effect of perspective, he is more alive than you. He is an unveiler, and he has you at gunpoint. He will leave a testament more honest than any notarized inheritance. At worst, he is a feeble fool, at best, an agitated witness, perhaps even a writer.