Making Up History

Making History in Twentieth-Century Quebec

Ronald Rudin

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YVES GINGRAS

Much like you, I deplore ... their tendency to contradict whatever older historians had written ... Much like you, I fear that the way in which they work – which has nothing to do with the scientific method – invalidates their findings.
—Lionel Groulx to Léo-Paul Desrosiers, 1958

Life is difficult nowadays in the "academic marketplace." Competition is fierce; scholars and editors struggle to find ways of making their products "visible" to a shrinking community of readers already drowning in publications in their chosen fields. Whereas it was usual to see a book acclaimed for its scholarship, originality or rigorous analysis, editors now prefer to insist, in the dust cover's advertisement, on the provocative aspect of a book, be it at the expense of coherence and credibility. Howard Stern is certainly provocative in his talk show, but that is hardly a quality or a reference.

University of Toronto Press thus assures us that Ronald Rudin's book *Making History in Twentieth-Century Quebec* is a "provocative study" that "questions the consensus among historians over the past twenty-five years [nothing less!] that Quebec had long constituted a 'normal' society." Now, despite the use of scare quotes, one can only conclude that if Quebec were not normal, it would thus be abnormal, whatever that could mean for a whole society. And even the attentive reader will search the book in vain to find a definition of Rudin's chosen "concept" of normalcy.

Rudin's objective was to present "a comprehensive analysis of Quebec historical writing over the course of the Twentieth Century." As the gallery of photographs suggests at the beginning of the book, his analysis is less that of a community, with its associations, congresses, journals and advanced training programs, than of the relationships among a dozen historians known as benchmarks of the discipline, to which he adds the ill-defined and all-encompassing category of the "revisionists" as the villains of his story. And though many of the historians discussed are still alive, Rudin interviewed none of them, thus indirectly confirming that this book is less the history of a community than a pamphlet about the development of the discipline over the last 30 years.

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The two main theses of the book are quite simple but are far from offering a "comprehensive analysis of Quebec historical writing," as suggested on the dust cover. First, according to Rudin Quebec historians since the Quiet Revolution, whom he dubs "the revisionists," have done their best to dismiss the contribution of Lionel Groulx as a bona fide historian. Second, they have tried to paint a "modern Quebec" that evolved as any other modern society, managing in the process to "marginalize" any part of Quebec history that would give an image of "backwardness."

Concerning Groulx, Rudin points to the fact that he created in 1947 the Institut d'histoire de l'Amérique française as well as the *Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique française*. Ironically, in insisting that Groulx was as "scientific" as any other of his time, Rudin himself plays the revisionist's game, although his rehabilitation of Groulx is welcome even if his polemical tone forces the note of Groulx's "modernity." After two chapters devoted to the priest's career, Rudin continues his narrative with a chapter on the nationalist and even separatist "Montreal approach" of Maurice Séguin, Michel Brunet and Guy Frégault, and one on the more federalist "Laval approach" of Marcel Trudel, Hamelin and Ouellet Rudin eschews the term of "school" that Quebec historians always used and, characteristically, tries to reverse the dominant interpretation simply by denigrating the influence and quality of work of the Montreal historians while insisting on the originality and quality of their Quebec City rivals. The last chapter is devoted to the young turks of the 1960s, the villain "revisionists" such as Louise Dechêne (a figure of transition according to Rudin) and the trio of Paul-André Linteau, René Durocher and J.-C. Robert. Implementing a rigorously ethnic view of a scientific community, Rudin excludes from his purview any anglophones who have made important contributions to Quebec history – John Dickinson, Brian Young, Allan Greer, J.I. Little and Bettina Bradbury are a few of the active historians who come to mind.

The (W)Righting of Quebec History

Rudin prefers insinuation to analysis. When he disagrees with the point of view of an earlier historian, Rudin constantly uses the adverb "curiously," thus subtly suggesting that the author had undeclared (and maybe dubious) motives. Talking about the *Manuel d'histoire du Canada*, Groulx's unpublished notes for his history course at Valleyfield College prepared in 1905–06, Rudin writes that it "has received curiously scant attention by historians," as if it *should* have been studied. This type of insinuation, of course, applies to anything that has not yet been studied. (Having myself often written about Brother Marie-Victorin, I could easily say that historians interested in the inter-war period curiously talk about Groulx but never about Marie-Victorin!) Again, commenting on François Xavier Garneau's unwillingness to tailor his own *Histoire du Canada*, first published in 1845, in response to clerical pressure, Rudin adds that "curiously" commentators such as Serge Gagnon have tended to ignore these facts. Rudin notes that analysts exaggerated Séguin's pessimistic view of the future of French Canadians in his thesis *La nation Canadian et l'agriculture* (Éditions Boréal Express, 1970) in order to contrast it better with Groulx's more optimistic view. Rudin thinks that Séguin's view should be tempered by the fact that his conclusion ended on an optimistic note. He then adds: "curiously, Jean Lamarre, who insisted on the extent of Séguin's break with Groulx, made no reference to the significance of this closing remark, while Jean Blain conveniently dismissed it as an exception." Perhaps these authors simply did not think it was as "significant" as Rudin suggests, considering the general tenet of Séguin's oeuvre. In any case, there is no point in insinuating that anyone's reading is more curious than his. If one were to play that game, one could also note that, curiously indeed, Rudin does not insist on the fact that Groulx himself wrote that Séguin had "a deep-seated and all-encompassing pessimism," a judgement more in keeping with Lamarre's and Blain's views than with Rudin's.

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Rudin's insinuations, which form a systematic modus operandi, frequently take the place of explanations, however tentative. For example, describing Frégault's strategy of attacking the *Canadian Historical Review* for publishing texts only in English, Rudin notes in parentheses that

"it was curious that Frégault should have chosen to protest before the CHA [Canadian Historical Association] about CHR policy, since the journal was, and still is, published by the University of Toronto Press, not the CHA." Had Rudin been more interested in analysis than in peremptory judgements, he could have seen that, far from curious, this strategy (for it was one) made perfect sense given that the community of English Canadian historians could have collectively pressed the CHR to change its policy more effectively than could the individual complaints of French Canadian historians to the Press. Is that not a more interesting hypothesis and a more satisfying way of practicing history than simply insinuating, in parentheses, that the object of analysis is behaving curiously?

Rudin confuses what philosophers of science call the context of justification with the context of discovery (or pursuit).

Another aspect of Rudin's historical method of insinuation is his systematic use of active verbs, which suggests a conscious strategy on the part of the historians he analyses. His method of reading into the minds of his actors is never explained and, in fact, none of his allegations and insinuations are supported by documentation. Again, a few samples should suffice. He notes Jean-Paul Bernard's conclusion, in *Les Rouges* (Presses de l'Université du Québec, 1971), that relatively large numbers of francophones supported the Liberals, and writes that Bernard's statement "was designed to indicate the weakness of clerical influence." Similarly, Rudin tells us that Jacques Rouillard, in his study of unions, "was eager to show" that Quebec workers were as likely to form unions and go on strike as any of their counterparts outside the province. To explain Serge Gagnon's treatment of Garneau mentioned above, he notes that "this was part of a larger strategy aimed at denying any legitimacy to Quebec historical writing until the arrival of the lay-professionals in the 1940s." More generally the revisionists of the 1970s and 1980s "were intent on placing Quebecers in the mainstream of modern capitalist society." The motor of action is thus always found in an unconscious drive toward "marginalizing" (a term very often used by Rudin) aspects of the past that did not fit with a positive image congruent with the booming 1960s. This kind of *psychanalyse sauvage* is, of course, immune to empirical test. More importantly, Rudin confuses what philosophers of science call the context of justification with the context of discovery (or pursuit). While everybody knows that the choice of research topics (say, unions instead of church, science instead of politics, women instead of industrialization) is influenced by many factors (social origins, social context, availability of funds, etc.), the results of that research either add or do not add new knowledge. Rudin pays no attention to the validity of the results obtained by the historians he so readily reduces to their social context, as if one could as easily say exactly the contrary of what they said. This attitude is linked to Rudin's professed relativism. But before I address this more philosophical aspect of his work, I must deal with another important methodological matter.

Traduttore traditore? Who Reads French Anyway!

Rudin explains in his preface that he has "translated all the French quotations in the text into English." Though his most probable readers are scholars interested in Quebec history who, I imagine, would read French as easily as I read English, he felt that leaving the quotes in their original French would have made the text "inaccessible to too many readers." I cannot say if Rudin underestimates his fellow Canadians or if his judgement reflects a real incapacity of English-Canadian-historians-interested-in-Quebec-history to read French. One thing though is certain: Rudin has a difficult time accurately translating the content of his chosen quotations. As I have not examined the quoted archival material, I will give a few examples of his handling of secondary sources.

Comparing Groulx with Édouard Montpetit and Marie-Victorin, Rudin cites Marcel Fournier, according to whom the new generation of intellectuals "embraced scientific rationality without rejecting a more traditional culture which conveyed a central role to religion." This statement about the centrality of religion would be consistent with Rudin's idea that the generation under discussion was traditional. However, this is not what Fournier wrote or meant. The original reads: "*la nouvelle génération d'intellectuels et de scientifiques ne renonce ni à son ancienne philosophie et ... elle n'abandonne pas pour autant ses convictions religieuses.*" A simple translation would read: "The new generation of intellectuals and scientists abandons neither its philosophy nor ... its religious convictions." Though subtle, the difference is important, for it is one thing to put religion at the centre of one's life and another not to abandon it altogether. Did Dawson, certainly one of Canada's greatest scientists and a Protestant fundamentalist, abandon his religious convictions when he became a scientist? Of course not, and this explains why he was so anti-Darwinian all his life. For Marie-Victorin, for example, science and religion have to go their own way and should not be mixed. But Rudin, uninterested in the evolution of Marie-Victorin's thinking, conveniently quotes a text of 1917, as if that position never changed, in which the Brother of Christian Schools noted that for a Christian professor science could not be totally objective or pursued for its own sake. No trace here of the fact that after 1920 Marie-Victorin was actively promoting pure science and became a public advocate of evolution at a time when Teilhard de Chardin was silenced by the Roman Church, and Protestant fundamentalists were busy with the Scopes trial south of the border.[1]

Commenting on Marcel Trudel's contribution to the 1963 edition of *Histoire du Canada par les textes* (Fides), Rudin notes that he included two new documents "designed to deflect attention from the early 19th century governorship of James Craig" (note again the imputation of motives). To show how Trudel was distinguishing himself from the Montreal approach, he cites his analysis of the role of the Church in the late-18th/early-19th century:

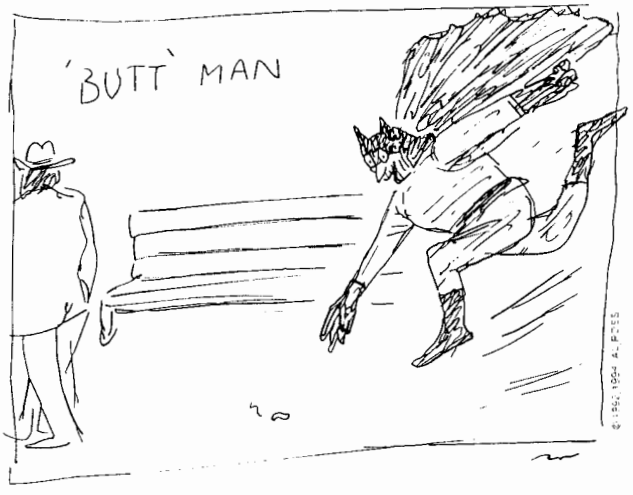
> *During the French Regime, the Church played its normal role, staying clear of any involvement with either agriculture or the settlement new lands; in the middle of the century, however, it went beyond the spiritual sphere to help French Canadians deal with their social problems* [emphasis added].

Now here is the original French:

> *Sous le Régime français, l'Église comme telle ne s'est occupée ni d'agriculture ni de peuplement; L'État jouait son rôle normal. Au milieu du dix-neuvième siècle, l'Église sort de son champ proprement spirituel pour aider les Canadiens français à résoudre leur problème social* (Manuel d'histoire du Canada, volume 1; emphasis added).

As one can see, on Rudin's reading the State became the Church!

Rudin writes that a "recent high-school textbook mentioned Groulx 'more as a nationalist leader than as an historian'." The structure of that sentence – the fact that it contains a quotation – suggests that the citation comes from the textbook. But this is not the case. In fact, the quotation is a comment



made by Micheline Dumont in her review of that textbook. The sentence should thus have been, "As Micheline Dumont noted, a recent textbook mentioned Groulx 'more as a nationalist leader than as a historian'."

Misusing Sources

Rudin also seems to have difficulty in distinguishing between an analysis or explanation of a quotation and its endorsement by the historian. He notes, for instance, that Serge Gagnon "claimed that Groulx had 'hushed up the quarrels between the church and the state'"; Gagnon had actually written, "As Hector Garneau notes, Groulx had hushed up the quarrels between the church and the state."

The systematic practice of misquoting, mistranslating and mixing part of quotations with his own reformulations are combined in Rudin's use of a paper that I published in 1995. Rudin writes that "Yves Gingras argued that Quebec historians since the 1960s had turned from polemical writing to scientific research so as to avoid 'being overly influenced by current social or economic concerns'." Reading that sentence, the reader can only conclude that the quoted part is my own view about the historians of the 1960s. In fact, it is not. This part of my text was about the sociological process of the formation of the discipline of history. I quoted from a speech made by Marcel Trudel in 1953 on the occasion of the presentation of the Léo-Parizeau medal to Guy Frégault; I analyzed Trudel's conception of history thus: *"Trudel défend en somme une histoire érudite fondée sur la recherche et l'argumentation et qui repose justement sur une distance par rapport à la demande sociale ou politique immédiate qui préfère toujours se voir raconter les gloires du passé"* (Bulletin d'histoire politique, volume 4, no. 2, 1995). I leave to the reader the task of finding the part of that sentence translated by Rudin.

In trying to show that even Serge Gagnon, one of the villains strongly criticized by Rudin, lately distanced himself form the "revisionists," Rudin writes that "Gagnon recognized that he would be taken to task by the revisionist historians, who preferred to see Catholicism as 'no more than a vile sedative imposed by the ruling classes'." Here again, a simple look at the original shows that the part quoted by Rudin referred explicitly to Freudo-Marxist epistemology and not to the "revisionists." Since Paul-André Linteau is presented as the paragon of revisionists, and though Rudin sees revisionists everywhere, he cannot seriously think that Linteau and his acolytes are in any sense related to Freudo-Marxists! If he had simply called or interviewed Gagnon, he could have learned that it was indeed the Quebec Marxists who thought that religion was the opium of the people, a classic quotation from Marx that Gagnon simply paraphrased.

Rudin also refers to documents without distinguishing between a historical paper for a professional journal, an opinion article or even a political speech by a prime minister. Thus, commenting on Trudel's view of New France, he juxtaposes – without comment, as if they had the same status – a 1957 paper in the *Cahiers de l'Académie canadienne-française* with a 1961 lecture on *"La séparation, solution de reniement"* a clearly political intervention using history as an argument against separatists. But the confusion of genres becomes surreal when Rudin quotes a 1994 political discourse by Premier Lucien Bouchard in the context of arguing that revisionists wanted to paint Quebeckers as normal.

We have yet to see a polished, dispassionate and rational contribution toward an accurate understanding of ... the history of historical writing in 20th-century Quebec.

In his desperate search for critical remarks against the revisionists, Rudin attains the summit of incompetence in his treatment of Fernand Dumont when he writes that the Laval sociologist criticized the revisionists' emphasis on "anonymous forces." According to Rudin, Dumont attributes the cultural crisis to the "way in which intellectuals, historians included, had emphasized the power of 'anonymous forces' [note the plural] to shape the experiences of the individual." He adds that Dumont "did think that Quebecers had been short-changed by the revisionist emphasis on structural factors." Now, in order to appreciate the magnitude of the misunderstanding, one should read the original text referred to by Rudin as page 92 of Dumont's *L'avenir de la mémoire* (Nuit Blanche, 1995):

> *Pour indiquer, au surplus, que l'abandon des coutumes qui faisaient vivre les Anciens constitue sans doute pour nous une libération, mais qui nous contraint aussi à un devoir: assurer des assises pour l'interprétation de l'histoire et la participation politique. Sans ces conditions indispensables pour la vitalité de traditions nouvelles, c'est le pouvoir anonyme qui, succédant à la mort des coutumes, remplacera les citoyens dans la responsabilité de conférer un sens à l'histoire. Car, rappelait Tocqueville, le pouvoir "aime que les citoyens se réjouissent, pourvu qu'ils ne songent qu'à se réjouir. Il travaille volontiers à leur bonheur, mais il veut en être l'unique agent et le seul arbitre; il pourvoit à leur sécurité, prévoit et assure leurs besoins, facilite leurs plaisirs, conduit leurs principales affaires, dirige leur industrie, règle leurs successions, divise leurs héritages; que ne peut-il leur ôter entièrement le trouble de penser et la peine de vivre?" Si l'on ne veut pas de cet ensommeillement, on doit convenir que se préoccuper de l'avenir de la mémoire n'est pas un divertissement d'esthète ou d'intellectuel nostalgique mais la volonté de garantir l'avenir de la liberté.*

Given the very elegant style of Dumont and the fact that he eschews jargon, it seems difficult not to see that he was referring to de Tocqueville and that the "anonymous power" (power in the singular, not "forces" in the plural) was not the revisionists but the State that wishes to control the memory of its citizens.

How Relativism Dissolves Scholarship

Toward the end of *Making History in Twentieth-Century Quebec*, Rudin discusses the nature of historical writing and noted that "There has been remarkably little reflection on the subject in Quebec over the past twenty years." Not only does he not give any evidence of English Canada's interest in the subject, but he also surprisingly ignores the publication of two books by Quebec historians: *L'Homme historien* by Nicole Gagnon and Jean Hamelin published by Edisem in 1979, and *Man and his Past: The Nature and Role of Historiography* by Serge Gagnon published in English by Harvest House in 1982. The latter is very interesting. In it we find that Gagnon was quite a relativist at the time, although more subtle than Rudin in his historical sociology of Quebec historical writing. It is striking that this book (as well as the other) is absent from Rudin's bibliography given that he systematically criticizes most of Gagnon's other books. Of course, neglecting either book makes life easier for those who think that there has been no historical sociology of Quebec history before Rudin's account. Yet Serge Gagnon's slim essay (79 pages!) contains not only a concise presentation of the main epistemological currents in history but also examples drawn from Quebec historiography. For instance, after commenting on E.H. Carr's view of the role of judgements in history, Gagnon gives an example taken from the historiography of New France and writes:

> *[I]n the past our historians identified with a kind of source corresponding to a theological understanding of how history unfolds, perfectly consistent with traditional French-Canadian society. In contrast, the disintegration of the traditional social framework in turn stimulated ... a reinterpretation of the past more in keeping with the new values and new goals of Quebec society. The revisionist tendencies are due at least partly to changes in Quebec society itself, regardless of the methodological progress made and the consequent improvements in our knowledge of society under the ancien régime.*

In the chapter called "History as Choice," Gagnon gives many examples of the "intimate link between the author and its public, between ideological production and historical production" not far from Rudin's objective. Noting that the choice of the subject of a biography was "already an ideological decision," Gagnon suggests that the publication of *Chiniquy* (Éditions du bien publique, 1955) by Marcel Trudel "reflected the spirit of the struggle waged by *Cité Libre* to shatter Quebec's Christendom." Even more interesting was his prediction that "if in coming years North America emphasizes Amerindian history, this will not be unrelated to the rejection of post-industrial capitalist society by a sizeable segment of the young generation eager for a return to primitive society." He would have been closer to the mark had he added that the rising movement in defence of the collective rights of the First Nations also pushed that topic onto the agenda of historians. Finally, noting that 26 percent of the theses on English Canadian history in progress in Canadian universities in 1967 dealt with one aspect or another of the left, Gagnon suggested that this fact was "intimately related to a growing radicalism in Canada" and to "the emergence of a left-wing school of historical writing in English Canada."

Had Rudin read GAGNON and taken it seriously, he would have realized that he did not have to wait for the publication of Peter Novick's *That Noble Dream* (Cambridge University Press, 1988) to understand the links between history and society and the limits of objectivity. Moreover, Gagnon's analysis was very sensitive to the difference between the choice of a topic and the validity of the conclusions obtained through documentation and analysis, a distinction absent in Rudin's crude epistemology. Even if one does not necessarily accept Gagnon's brief and incisive analysis, the comparison of his view of the development of the historical discipline to Rudin's makes plain that the former was much more securely grounded in the large body of sociological and epistemological analysis of the discipline than the latter. Rudin uses his own peculiar brand of spontaneous sociology (or psychosociology) of history, which he attempts to legitimize by ritually referring to Novick's book, which, in any case, is much more sophisticated than his own.

More could be said about the curious methodology Rudin uses to analyze the evolution of Quebec history, but I think I have demonstrated that although his book is provocative, it is not a serious contribution to the discipline. Of course, readers may find stories that make good reading. And the self-proclaimed relativist could still say that all the problems I have raised here are but details.

And yet, scholarship as a social pursuit is a collective endeavour based, to a large extent, on trust. In accepting to discuss in any detail the interpretation of events put forward by a colleague, one always makes the implicit assumption that the work is worth being discussed because it is up to the actual standards of the discipline. This is clearly not the case for *Making History in Twentieth-Century Quebec*. The crude theory of the relationship between history and society used in this book harks back to the historical sociology of 50 years ago (see, for example, my previously mentioned article in the *Bulletin d'histoire*), although that theory may be useful for a pamphlet written in reaction to contemporary events in Quebec. We have yet to see a polished, dispassionate and rational contribution toward an accurate understanding of (as opposed to judgement on) the history of historical writing in 20th-century Quebec.[2] For if it is true that, according to Carl Berger in *The Writing of Canadian History* (Oxford University Press, 1976), English Canadian historians *write* history, and that, if we follow Rudin, French Canadian historians *make* history, then as an English Canadian historian living in Quebec, Rudin has taken a still further step in making up history.

Ethnographic Postscript

Since its publication in 1997, Rudin's book has raised a fair amount of debate among Quebec historians. There have been at least three public debates in the presence of its author, and the book was translated into French within a year of its publication in English.

Having participated in some of these events, I must admit that I was struck by the fact that none of the commentators invited, all arguably competent scholars, raised any major methodological problems. There were only two exceptions. The first was Serge Gagnon, who had a vested interest in setting the record straight.[3] Even he, however, missed most of the problems I have raised here, for he only called attention to Rudin's treatment of his comments on Garneau. The other exception was Paul-André Linteau, who objected to the way Rudin translated one of his sentences.[4] All the other commentators discussed Rudin's thesis as if it rested on the secure foundations of archival research, secondary literature and scholarly arguments.

When, after the panellists had offered a first wave of comments, I raised a hand to point out some of the elementary deficiencies noted above, it was very interesting to observe not only Rudin's uneasiness and incapacity to answer (even in English) but also the commentators' slack jaws, as if they had suddenly realized that they had not read the book very carefully, being too quick and eager to participate in a "provocative" debate, if only to have a platform for expressing one's own ideas.

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I do not know if these micro-events are linked to the problems of the academic marketplace raised in my introduction above. They clearly suggest, however, that the pathos of relativism (or worse, of postmodernism, for which anything goes) is congruent with the difficulty many scholars seem to have in applying the basic methodological principles to their peers that they nonetheless continue to teach to generations of students. Do they realize that in abandoning the rigours of the discipline, which alone makes possible a distanced and cold analysis of historical events, they accelerate the decline of scholarship? Lionel Groulx was right: "The way in which they work invalidates their findings." ●

Notes

1. For more details on this see, Frère Marie-Victorin, **Science, culture et nation, textes choisis et présentés par Yves Gingras** (Éditions Boréal Express, 1996).
2. For an excellent beginning, based on a thorough knowledge of the sociology of scientific disciplines, see Patrick Régimbald, **Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique française** (volume 51, number 2, 1997).
3. See Serge Gagnon, **Bulletin d'histoire politique** (volume 7, number 1, 1998).
4. See the exchange between Rudin and Paul-André Linteau and Fernand Harvey in **Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique française** (volume 51, number 3, 1998).

To the Woman who Complained My Metaphors Were Masculinist

Ok, I think I'm on the right track. I'm on a beach in Scauri
As I write this, trying to get it all in, hold the moment, the now
And the not-now, the page a patch of sunstruck sand giving
Back the day's heat, a warmth that passes from this sentence
To you. But no hidden meanings. I want to see without comparing,
Without analogy; to stare at the sea until the roiling fact of it
Is enough, stare at the reef until its existence is doubled only
By its shadow on the waves. If a metaphor comes - nouns, say,
Clumped like mussels knuckled into the hollow of a rock -
Throw it away. I'm trying, believe me. I'm trying. But it's hard
To abandon old habits. Each word a solid thing, but buoyant,
Like a flat stone, leaf-light, skipping across the water. Oops.

Carmine Starnino