From the 17th to the 20th Century in Three Decades: The Accelerated Evolution of French Canadian Society as Reflected in Its Theatre

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IT is customary scholarly procedure to trace a nation's origins back to its sources through careful research and documentation. I would like to leave such academic procedures aside for a moment, though, and discover how Canada *really* came to be by going back into the realm of fantasy and "once upon a time."

Well, it seems that once upon a time, "à l'époque où François I régnait sur la douce France," there lived among the heavenly hosts a mischievous little angel, Angelot by name, who loved to sneak into the great saint Peter's office (in the Saint's absence, of course), and play with the keys to the heavenly gates. The keys were enormous and very heavy, and Angelot a very small angel, so the inevitable was bound to happen: one day, the keys slipped from his little hands, and dropped right down to earth, digging an enormous hole in the surface of the ocean. Little Angelot, needless to say, was panic-stricken; but Francel, his big brother, comes to the rescue. Not only does he retrieve the keys, but he also manages to cover up the huge hole by snipping off choice bits of land from the existing continents, and piecing them together, thus creating a marvellous new land, which combines the orchards of Normandy, the mountains of Switzerland, the lakes of Italy, etc. Angelot's misdeed is forgiven by the Almighty. Together, the two angels look over the nations of the earth for a suitable colonizer for their new

country; and their choice falls on the French. As for a name, Angelot has no difficulty: it will be CANADA — the initial C standing for *croix, ciel, courage,* and the three A's for "amour, qui divinise toute chose."

A charming medieval legend? Obviously not. The preceding story is a not unrepresentative example of French Canadian radio drama — a genre which filled the role of a national theatre for French Canada for decades; it was written and broadcast in 1950.[1]

Much of French Canadian radio drama, from the beginnings to the mid-fifties, exhibits a combination of lyricism and medieval spirit which stands in sharp contrast to the aggressively naturalistic approach of the English language radio plays of the same period. This "medievalism" appears in the spontaneous use of the "merveilleux chrétien," as we have seen; the frequent use of fairy tale, legend and parable; an assertion of simple faith and orthodox morality; and the frequent use of the quest motif. As the national theatre of French Canada, the radio drama reflects the conservative and traditionalist attitudes which are also exemplified in the province's nostalgic motto, "je me souviens."

A serious dramaturgy in the sense of original stage plays, written in a contemporary idiom and coming to grips with the realities of contemporary French Canadian society does not appear until after World War II — but then, the transition from medieval to modern is accomplished in three breathtaking decades, with three major playwrights, Gratien Gélinas, Marcel Dubé and Michel Tremblay, and two key dates: 1948 (*Tit-Coq,* by Gélinas) and 1968 (*Les Belles Soeurs,* by Tremblay).

The late development of a genuine, native drama in French Canada must be explained in terms of the historical facts. Until quite recently, French Canadian historians looked back upon the age of Nouvelle France as the one heroic period the country ever had. At that time, the new colony could also boast an active theatrical life. Garrison drama was performed regularly, for the benefit of the French as well as for "nos

sauvages." The classics could be seen on the stages of the New World within a year or two of their Paris or Versailles premières, and the outcry aroused in Paris by Molière's *Tartuffe* even had its counterpart in the *Tartuffe* scandal of Quebec in 1694. When Nouvelle France found itself abruptly cut off from the mother country after the Conquest, the result proved disastrous to the economy and traumatic to the collective psyche. A sense of outrage at the betrayal by France combined with an increased awareness of the need to survive as a French entity. Interestingly enough, it was felt that this survival was to be achieved by looking back, rather than forward. The developments of the 17th century have remained the central molding factors in the evolution of French Canadian society right up to the middle of the 20th century: the apostolic spirit of the Counter-Reformation, which here acquired a strong Jansenist tinge; the cultural tradition of classicism, which led to the educational system of strong *collèges classiques,* but a total disregard for pure or applied science; the political ideal of absolutism, combined with a quasi-medieval, semi-feudal concept of society. From the beginning, the Church held a position of supreme power on the new continent. The fact that Bishop Laval of Quebec held greater authority than the Sun King himself is representative of the supreme position of the Church throughout the history of French Canada.

The period between the Conquest, 1759, and Confederation, 1867, is marked by a spirit of "survivance-résistance" which manifested itself in various practical, rather than literary ways: the famous "revanche des berceaux" (the highest birth rate ever recorded in a white population), the fight for French language rights and French schools. Theatrical activity, however, declined seriously during this period. While the population retained its love for the stage, as documented by the popularity of amateur theatre and touring companies, these activities had to be carried out under the double handicap of strong disapproval by both Church and State. The political authorities discouraged the theatre as they saw it as a possible seedbed of rebellion and dissent. To the

ecclesiastical authorities, it represented a "den of all the vices" in the best tradition of the Church Fathers. Threatening pastoral letters and loud thunderings from the pulpit remained the menacing accompaniment to what little theatrical activity took place during those years. Nor did the situation change until well into the twentieth century. The great Sarah Bernhardt herself, on tour in Montreal, did not escape ecclesiastical censure.

With Confederation in 1867, the problem of cultural survival for the French minority appeared even more acute than before. Population statistics eloquently explain the rising tide of nationalism: French Canadians represented less than a third of all Canadians, and no more than 2% of the population of the North American continent. Moreover, theirs was a largely rural population. Trade and industry were in English hands, as French Canadians were slow to accept the industrialization of their country. The reason was not only the traditional lack of emphasis on commerce and technology in the French Canadian educational system; it was mainly ideological, and lay in the combination of patriotic regionalism, messianism and agriculturalism preached by the Church and encouraged by the State. These attitudes found their artistic expression in the *terroir* literature which flourished well into the twentieth century. Mgr. L.-A. Paquet, theologian, orator and nationalist, summed up the messianic ideal of his people in his St. Jean Baptiste Day speech of 1902:

> ". . . we are the messengers of the religious idea; . . . Our mission is less to manipulate capital than to change ideas; it consists less in lighting the fires of factories than to maintain and make shine afar the luminous fire of religion and thought."[2]

In a pastoral letter of May 1941 — in the midst of the most technologically advanced war mankind had ever known! — the bishop of Quebec reminded his flock that "as an agricultural people, we shall survive only through the land."[3] Two years later, in 1943, the abbé Bergeron published a book with the telling title "L'agriculture et l'église, deux amies intimes d'origine divine" ("Agriculture and the Church, Two

Intimate Friends of Divine Origin") in which he warned against the dangers of urbanization and proclaimed the rural parish, the large family and the Catholic mother as the cornerstones of a happy and prosperous French Canada. It is these attitudes which explain the idyllic tone of the bulk of the French Canadian radio drama production until the mid 1950's, with writers such as Yves Thériault, Yvette Naubert, Georges Pelland and Félix Leclerc, who idealize, romanticise and sentimentalize the activities and characters of village life, or else create charming tales and legends in the medieval tradition of the *fioretti*.

The fact of Confederation, as we have seen, served to accentuate the need to define and preserve the French Canadian cultural identity. The wars which followed brought the ever-present nationalism into a new focus. Beginning with the Boer War, and becoming more acute with World Wars I and II, the issue of imperialism vs. nationalism arose as the central problem of the French Canadian people. Unwilling to fight for the cause of the British empire, and disenchanted with France, especially since the Revolution with its change in value system, French Canadians put up a vigorous resistance to conscription, much to the indignation of English Canadians. Marcel Dubé's play of 1957, *Un simple soldat,* eventually summed up the predicament of the French Canadian caught up in a "foreign" war: his hero, Joseph Latour, unable to find meaningful work at home, fights first in one, then in another war which is totally alien to him, and eventually finds a hero's death in far-off Korea.

In spite of the agriculturist gospel preached by the clergy, urbanization and industrialization of French Canadian society eventually could not be held off. By the time of World War I, half of the French Canadian population was living in the city. This shift in population led to a new and more aggressive type of nationalism based on purely economic factors, the discrepancy in standard of living between the French and the English in the big cities, most notably, Montreal.

Conscription and economic nationalism, then, were the two central concerns of French Canadian society as World War II ran its course. Not surprisingly, these are also the themes of the first genuine French Canadian drama, a contemporary play, in contemporary language, by an author "bien de chez nous": Gratien Gélinas' *Tit-Coq,* premièred at the Monument National Theatre in Montreal on May 22, 1948. With this play, Gélinas became the founding father of a realistic tradition of playwriting creditably carried on by Marcel Dubé in the 50's, and climaxing with the work of Michel Tremblay in the late 60's and 70's.

The development of the thirty years between 1945 and 1975 falls into two clearly defined periods of about fifteen years each: the difficult beginnings under the repressive and ultra-conservative Duplessis regime, sometimes called "la grande noirceur" (the dark ages); and the turmoil and upheaval of the Quiet Revolution of the 60's and its aftermath of creative explosion.

Although French Canadian dramaturgy officially begins with the production of *Tit-Coq* in 1948, little other work of note appears during the remainder of the Duplessis era. Radio drama alone constitutes the national theatre of the time, and its conservatism fully reflects the conservatism of the regime. The only original voice remained that of Gratien Gélinas, who made a bold and pioneering contribution to the theatre of the future with his annual satirical revue, *Fridolinons,* which first appeared on radio and from 1938 on became a live stage show. The revues made history on two counts. For the first time ever, a French Canadian writer brought his audience face to face with a character and situations right out of their own experience, which they could fully identify with — and identify they did, to the point that Gélinas himself came to be called "notre Fridolin" from then on. Also, his satire, gentle by the standards of the 70's, did represent the first conscious attempt to shatter the central and pious myths of French Canadian society: myths concerning the family and religion. It also provided some acid commentary on the existing social, economic and political situation.

The title character of the show, played by the author himself, was conceived naturalistically, but carried heavy symbolic overtones. A child of the slums of East Montreal, Fridolin is a typical French Canadian teenager, dressed in short pants, a tricolor hockey sweater, and a pair of kneesocks which are forever slipping down to his ankles. Like young David, he is armed with a slingshot. Fridolin's life is hard, and his many adventures invariably end in disaster: "eh souffrance!" is his favorite expression. But he always bounces back, ready to try his luck once more — a perfect image of the *survivance* spirit of his people. Like the audience who filled the theatre night after night, Fridolin speaks an idiom far removed from the elegance of classical French, and heavily interspersed with anglicisms: "tu parles d'une bad luck!" "on a eu un fun," etc. — another bold innovation on the part of the author, a full thirty years before joual *officially* appeared on stage with Tremblay's *Les Belles Soeurs*. The satirical sketches around Fridolin are set in urban more often than rural backgrounds. In the political satires, Duplessis, unceremoniously referred to as "notre Maurice," comes in for a good deal of the fun; Gélinas' range, however, goes all the way from local to international issues. Family life, marriage and traditional religious attitudes all come under attack. There is even an occasional attempt to analyze the ultimate taboo, the sexual malaise of French Canadian society, a theme which was to become central to much of the later dramatic writing. Again, Gélinas touches upon one of the focal issues of much later dramatic literature in the most serious of all the Fridolin sketches, *The Edifying Life of Jean Baptiste Laframboise*. Here he shows an unusually gifted child whose talents are systematically repressed by a society which fears nothing so much as excellence. At the end of the play, Jean Baptiste, the poet-who-could-have-been-but-wasn't, appears before the Lord to justify himself, and gives the following bitter evaluation of the society into which he was born: ". . . I was nearly a genius without knowing it. I never thought that could happen to a Canadian . . . You see, God, the big failing of my people is that they have no confidence in

themselves. They can't conceive the idea that a fellow who happens to born in St. Agapit can be just as intelligent as another who happens to be born in Paris, London or New York. It isn't very flattering to you, Lord, because after all, being infinitely just, God, you couldn't do otherwise than give us as much talent as others . . . Only they don't understand that — it's funny, because as far as everything else goes, they're very Catholic. . . ."[4] This condemnation of the congenital timidity of the French Canadian has its political counterpart in Borduas' famous manifesto of 1948, *Refus Global,* which also lashes out at the traditional fears of his fellow countrymen.

Fridolin, then, set the stage for a wave of consciousness-raising theatre which swept Canada after the end of the Duplessis era. Within a period of a few years, French Canadian theatre comes of age, develops, diversifies in a veritable explosion of activity as all the forces of fermentation which had been repressed so long erupted with a vengeance. The theatre, of course, was simply reflecting the changes which were occurring in the society at large.

Laval University, and especially its *Faculté des Sciences Sociales* under a forward-looking Dominican, Père Georges Henri Lévesque, had been a centre of social discontent for years; it was the focal point from which the young generation began to exert pressure for social reform and political liberation. Pressure led to action in the 60's, with the implementation of drastic changes in many aspects of social life. Reforms in the educational system included laïcisation and liberalisation of the traditional *collèges classiques,* along with increased emphasis on science and economics at the post-secondary level. Important social changes also took place, resulting in a doubling of real income. In the area of religion, the outward picture remained constant; but in spite of continued church affiliation, drastic changes in attitude took place among the population as well as among the clergy itself. The most important effect of the Quiet Revolution, however, was a general clearing of the air on the cultural scene. For the

artists, writers, dramatists of French Canada, it now became possible to undertake a far-reaching "prise de conscience" ("consciousness-raising") to diagnose the ills of society and offer remedies. The diagnosis was quick, if not simple: alienation on all levels was seen as the central *malaise* of Quebec. The radical review *Parti-Pris*, founded in 1963, summed up the various aspects of this alienation in its first issue. It is seen as political: "we have only a provincial government, without power and without sources of essential revenue"; economic: "nearly all of our natural resources and our industry are in the hands of foreigners"; cultural and linguistic: "the degeneration of our language and the retrogression of our people reflect a collective malady."[5] The theatre of the period 1960-1975 deals essentially with these aspects of the alienation problem, and their ramifications. It is a theatre which calls for liberation on all levels: political, social, and above all, psychological and spiritual.

The open call to revolution as expressed by Pierre Vallières finds only an occasional echo in the theatre of the period, such as in Jacques Ferron's *La tête du roi* (1963 — the year of FLQ violence). More often, the theme is treated in a variety of subtler and more ingenious ways. A number of plays take a concrete event of political situation as a take-off point, such as Françoise Loranger's *Le chemin du Roy,* a dramatic commentary on De Gaulle's fateful visit to Quebec. But, the political problem is also seen in a more universal perspective as part of the conflict of the generations. In its most sophisticated form, the problem of alienation and the need for liberation are viewed as an historically induced collective psychological trauma. This is the aspect I would like to discuss first.

As mentioned before, the *Refus Global* manifesto of 1948 had already pointed to "peur," "fear," as the central psychological problem of French Canadians. The theme is taken up with a vengeance in Françoise Loranger's *Médium Saignant* of 1970. This play deals specifically with the conflict over French language rights. However, with the help of a Pirandellian play-within-the-play-within-the-play technique,

as well as audience participation, the author extends the specific theme so as to be seen in the context of the history of Quebec (which is re-enacted on stage) and the underlying psychological problem. The play culminates in a wildly ritualistic ceremony of exorcism with the "démon de la peur," the ultimate target; it ends on a note of triumphant and liberated self-assertion:

> Demon of fear, outside of me . . .
> In the name of our alienation
> And of the decisions
> And gestures we must make
> Demon of fear, outside of me
> In the name of those who have died
> With honour or in shame
> From Dollard to Montcalm
> From Chenier to Riel
> . . . . .
> In the name of Vallieres and Gagnon
> . . . . .
> Demon of fear, outside of me.
> In the name of the Quebec that is our heritage
> In the name of this country which we must build
> And which we shall all build together
> Demon of fear, outside of me . . .

Other fears included in the long litany are "fear of myself"; "fear of tomorrow"; "fear of the English", etc. The incantation climaxes in a triumphant assertion of self-confidence, as the frantic rhythm is narrowed down more and more in the final lines: demon outside of me/outside of me/ME, ME, ME, ME." The message comes through clearly: only the fear-liberated individual can undertake the task of the political and social liberation of the group.

The boulevard-style plays of Marcel Dubé deal with the same theme in a more conventional manner. His *Florence* takes up the theme of the liberation of the individual, in this case, a young woman from the working class, from the unbearable restrictions of her home and the limitations of her job. Florence achieves her personal liberation by running off to New York (the symbolism here is admittedly somewhat shoddy). Her parents remain, but the daughter's action opens her long-suffering father's eyes. He now sees the inadequacies

of his own life and attitudes: "I am beginning to understand . . . It's because we were afraid of life, because we were mired in principles which can't satisfy girls like Florence . . . At school desks, in church on Sundays, during election campaigns, in factories, in offices, everywhere they've taught us to be afraid. They've told us that the best way to defend ourselves was to shut ourselves up in our houses and our parishes, safe from harm . . . That's why we're nothing but weaklings."[6] In another one of his plays, *Les beaux dimanches,* Dubé accuses Church and State of having conspired for centuries to cultivate "la peur et l'ignorance" in an attempt to repress all dynamism and affirmation of life in the French Canadian population — which thus becomes incapable of rebellion. A full victory over fear is not seen in québecois theatre until Michel Tremblay's *Sainte Carmen de la Main* of 1975, whose heroine defies fear, society — and dies gloriously, a martyr to the cause.

With the rise of separatism in the 60's, the theme of the conflict of the generations enters the theatre of Quebec. It receives its most moving treatment in the last play of Gélinas, *Hier les enfants dansaient (Yesterday the Children Were Dancing),* 1966. The emotional impact of the play stems from the fact that the author presents us with a fully idealized family, torn apart against their will, inevitably, by historical forces. Gélinas' Gravel family, so full of love, good will and respect for each other, clearly belongs to an earlier and more naïve stage of French Canadian drama, while the conflict which destroys them is totally contemporary. Pierre Gravel, an eminent lawyer, federalist and Liberal, is about to be named to the post of Minister of Justice when he discovers that his favorite son, André, belongs to a Separatist terrorist organization which is just then organizing a series of bombings. Obviously, the father of a terrorist leader cannot aspire to a post in the federal cabinet. Although the young man loves his father dearly, he refuses to compromise. The central portion of the play is taken up by a confrontation between the generations which sets the conservative arguments of the father against the radical views — clearly

based on the writings of Vallières and Chaput — of the son. A highly emotional element is added to the scene with the appearance of the mother, torn between her loyalty to her husband and her love for her son. The outcome is of course inevitable: the older generation must make way for the new. A final farewell handshake testifies to the enduring love as well as the irreconcilable differences between the two men.

While Gélinas presents both sides of the generation conflict with impartiality, the majority of plays dealing with this theme set an idealized, idealistic younger generation up against hopelessly corrupt, ineffectual parents, incapable of action or even direction. An excellent case in point is Marcel Dubé's previously mentioned *Les beaux dimanches,* 1965, a scathing play of social satire which explores the frustrations of the meaningless life led by the well-to-do, middle-aged middle class. While the parent generation in this play pathetically struggles to somehow "make it" through a long weekend, floating on a sea of Scotch and too enervated even to bring to consummation their half-hearted affairs, the younger generation has found a reason to live in the cause of political radicalism. Olivier, a highly intelligent medical doctor, acts as the spokesman for the author. He alone concurs with Dominique, a student who praises her colleagues who have been arrested and jailed, for they have understood that "we must no longer count on the corrupt generations which precede us . . . They are ready to sacrifice themselves for those who hadn't the courage."[7] Olivier fully identifies with Dominique and her group: "They are us, without fear."[8]

While establishment writers like Gélinas and Dubé deal with the political themes of Quebec in a highly sophisticated manner, and succeed in achieving universality by setting them in the general context of the human condition, such attempts at universality are rudely comdemned by the more radical playwrights and companies who concern themselves directly with political theatre in the narrow sense of the word. Their work is often inspired by a specific incident. To give a few representative examples: Françoise Loranger's *Le chemin du Roy* (1968) is a conscious effort to recapture and preserve

the impact of De Gaulle's fateful visit on the population of Quebec. Robert Gurik's *Hamlet, Prince du Québec,* also of 1968, puts the General's famous "vive le Québec libre!" into the mouth of the dying Hamlet: "My death must help others. A free Quebec . . . must . . . exist."[9] Gurik's adaptation of the Hamlet legend to the realities of contemporary Quebec is a remarkably successful tour de force, both in the transposition of the characters, who here wear the masks of living politicans, and in the variations to the "canonized" speeches of Shakespeare. Thus, "to be or not to be" becomes "être ou ne pas être libre!" and the skull found by the gravediggers turns out to belong to one of the heroes of the 1837 uprising. The character equivalencies are carried out in a somewhat obvious symbolism. Hamlet, of course, represents indecisive Quebec, oppressed by both King/Anglophone Power and Queen/The Church. His loyalty belongs to the real parent he has lost, France, represented by the Ghost/De Gaulle. Major political figures make up the rest of the cast, most important among them Horatio/Lévesque and Laertes/Trudeau.

Political-revolutionary intention becomes even more clearly manifest in the theatrical activity of many of the more recent, young leftist groups, who work on the basis of improvisation and collective creation, rather than from a written text. *Cré Antigone,* a production of the *théâtre euh!* of Quebec, e.g., uses the Antigone legend as a basic pattern for a protest against the events of the October crisis of 1970. Like many of the socialist/activist productions, this play is heavily influenced by Brechtian techniques. The climactic final speech of Antigone echoes not only the political creed, but even the rhythms of Brechtian poetry:

> "He who lives on must not say never.
> He who is confident is not true.
> Things do not stay the same.
> When those who reign supreme have spoken
> Those over whom they reign will speak.
> Whose responsibility is it that oppression continues? OURS!
> Whose responsibility is it to smash it? OURS!
> Let him who is beaten stand erect again
> Let him who is lost struggle."[10]

The play ends on a note of supreme irony, with the *O Canada* sung to the tune of the American national anthem.

Next to creating an increased awareness of the need for social and political change, the Quebec theatre of the post 1960 period assumed as a major task the job of debunking the traditional French Canadian myth of the sanctity of the family. We have seen how the large peasant family was presented to the population as an ideal for centuries, and how this ideal found its counterpart in the *terroir* type of literature, as well as the radio plays of the 1940's and 50's. In the 60's, a sharp reaction sets in, as writers move rapidly from the idyllic to the monstrous type of family. The work of Gélinas stands as a bridge between the two generations. While *Tit-Coq* and *Yesterday the Children Were Dancing* present idealized versions of the family unit, his *Bousille and the Just* already gives a less naïve, more realistic and critical view of family life. The *nouveau théâtre* of the post-Duplessis era assumes an unmitigatedly negative attitude towards the family: "Whatever the form (of the play), we say no to the family . . . The family is the foundation of the system. If the family collapses . . . It's done for."[11] — thus Paule Baillargeon in a discussion of the work of the *Grand Cirque Ordinaire* theatre company (1974). Besides the obvious Marxist implications of the statement quoted, the general negativism towards the family is based on two main aspects of family life. The first is the family's inextricable involvement in the empty American/capitalist/bourgeois value system of the consumer society; the second, the prevalence of a strong sexual/emotional handicap in Quebecois society, a handicap which makes the country into what Dubé has boldly called "the land of the unloved."[12]

The most eloquent satire on the consumer society and its effect on those who subscribe to its values has been provided by Michel Tremblay with his highly poetic grotesque *Les Belles Soeurs*. The play presents fifteen assorted women representative of a neighbourhood in a working class district of Montreal. They have come together to help one of their number, Germaine, who has won a million gold bond stamps,

to paste this unexpected windfall into the booklets provided. The fifteen women are fifteen clearly differentiated characters, but they all share one basic trait: frustration and emotional impotence. To Germaine, the purchase power invested in her one million stamps appears as the road to salvation, with the catalogue of all the household items which are now within her grasp as her Promised Land. Against this background, the naturalistic dialogue and the stylized choral interludes emphasize the quiet dispair and seething anger of the other women at the essential meaninglessness of their existence, an unending round of household routines made bearable only by the weekly parish bingo, high point of their lives. This underlying theme is beautifully brought out in the two central choral recitations of the play, the "maudite vie plate" and the "ode to the bingo."

The younger theatre companies have taken up the same theme in their *créations collectives. La famille transparente,* created by the *Grand Cirque Ordinaire* in 1970, provides another typical example of a less poetic, but equally virulent satire on the consumer society and its destructive effect on the family. Here is the complaint of the baby of the family, aptly named "Bébé Buick":

> "I took off all my clothes
> I displayed my beautiful brown body
> My beautiful Tropic Tan body
> My Wonderbra breasts
> My flat stomach
> My Philishave legs
> My Colgate smile
> My Miss Clairol hair
> My doll's face . . . "

Even more effective than the dramatists' satires against the family as a contemptible partner in the consumer society are their attacks against the emotional and physical impotence which characterizes the Quebecois family unit, and manifests itself in a total alienation of the individual members from each other. This theme is probably the most pervasive in the dramatic production of the last fifteen years; but concern with the problem is by no means restricted to the work of literary

artists. When Dubé coined the phrase "the land of the unloved" in the context of one of his plays, his observation echoed exactly a similar remark, made by Pierre Vallières in his *Nègres Blancs d'Amérique.* Discussing his working class parents, Vallières says " . . . I think my parents never experienced love, but pretended to love one another, as millions of Quebeckers have done and still do."[13] Vallières' diagnosis about the roots of this particular evil also corresponds to the interpretation given by Dubé. Vallières states: "I do not remember seeing in my parents that *joie de vivre* noticeable in those who are secure, who have faith in themselves and who are ready to believe in life."[14] Dubé's doctor Olivier comes to a similar conclusion; and carries the argument a step further: "How can we speak of freedom when we began by denying the splendour of the act of love, the wondrous pleasures of the senses?"[15]

The entire dramatic production of Michel Tremblay can be seen as variations on this theme. In fact, the only instance of romantic love between two young people of opposite sex in any Tremblay play occurs in the case of a brother and sister — Serge and Nicole in *Bonjour, là, bonjour.* Many of his plays deal with the alienation of sexuality into homosexuality, often in the somewhat surrealistic setting of the music hall or drag bar. His boldest exploration of sidetracked sexuality is presented in his most recent play, *Damnée Manon, Sacrée Sandra,* which physically juxtaposes on stage two diametrically opposed, if complementary, misfits of the sexual scene: Sandra, the transvestite sex maniac and Manon, the mystic and *dévote.* As the play progresses, it soon becomes clear that each one of the two seeming opposites pursues an identical goal, the attainment of an ultimate and totally fulfilling experience. The complementary quality of the two characters is elaborated through detailed parallels, until at the end they are both revealed as separate aspects of the poet's own searching mind.

When he does deal with a conventional family setting, Tremblay invariably presents the family as a gruesome mechanism for self-destruction. Escape from the family "trap" is

seen as the only survival route for the individual, but most of Tremblay's characters lack the energy for breaking out ("chus pas capable," i.e., "I can't"). His most successful portrayal of the monstrous family is the grotesque *Forever Yours, Marie Lou.* His protagonists, Léopold and Marie-Louise, live together in a hell of their own making which they are unable to unmake: bitter, frustrated, petty, incapable of genuine communication, they have never known the joy of sexual or emotional fulfillment. Family life for them and their children is not a joint undertaking, but rather an entrapment of isolated individuals in enforced togetherness: "We are all loners together," says Marie Lou. The play ends, not unpredictably, in self-destruction: Léopold invites his wife to join him for a drive in the car, and she acquiesces, knowing full well he means to smash them against a cement wall. Of the two remaining daughters, one succeeds in freeing herself from the destructive influence of the family: she becomes Carmen, the cabaret singer, heroine and martyr in the next play, *Sainte Carmen de la Main.* The other sister remains marked for life, unable to extricate herself from her past (the political symbolism here is rather transparent). We find her again as Manon, the seeker after mystical thrills in *Damnée Manon, Sacrée Sandra.*

In spite of the overtones of social and political symbolism, Michel Tremblay, unlike other Quebecois dramatists, has succeeded in going beyond the immediate concerns of his time and place to achieve genuine universality. His work can be considered "liberated" both ideologically and technically. For the first time in French Canadian theatre history, we have here a dramatic opus which achieves a natural and spontaneous synthesis of many of the styles and structures of the past, which Tremblay combines into original and eminently contemporary forms. Basically naturalistic, he is not afraid to apply classical techniques of dramatic structure, and to combine these with any of the modernistic approaches seen in the theatre since Pirandello. His work represents the first significant step away from the traditional, almost pathological isolationism and self-centeredness of *québecois*

society. By 1975, the dramatic literature of Quebec had joined the modern international theatre scene, and it can truly be said that Quebec has at last left behind the *siècle d'or,* and entered the contemporary world.

NOTES

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[1]Eliane Depeyre, *Canada,* Théâtre des Nouveautés, 1950. Unpublished Manuscript.

[2]Mason Wade, *The French Canadians* (Toronto, 1968), p. 509.

[3]Quoted in Jean Bergeron, *L'agriculture et l'église, deux amies intimes d'origine divine* (Québec, 1943).

[4]Gratien Gélinas, *The edifying life of Jean Baptiste Laframboise.* Unpublished Manuscript.

[5]*Parti-Pris,* I, 1. p. 3.

[6]Marcel Dubé, *Florence* (Institut Littéraire du Québec, n.d.), p. 95.

[7]Marcel Dubé, *Les beaux dimanches,* (Montréal, Leméac, 1968), p. 91.

[8]*Ibid.,* p. 99.

[9]Robert Gurik, *Hamlet, Prince du Québec* (Editions de l'Homme, Montréal, 1968), p. 99.

[10]cf. "Orientations, mutations du théâtre euh!", in *Jeu,* no. 2, printemps 1976.

[11]"Entretien avec Paule Baillargeon," *Stratégie* no. 9, été 1974.

[12]Olivier, in *Les beaux dimanches.*

[13]Pierre Vallières, *Nègres blancs d'Amérique* (Paris, 1969), p. 82.

[14]*Ibid.*

[15]Marcel Dubé, *Les beaux dimanches,* p. 161.