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Sacrifice and Death In French-Canadian Fiction: An English Reading

In our wake, trees grew again, grass rose anew, flowers opened, the monument of foolishness sank into ruin . . . On all sides, corruption was retreating; thought, art, beauty and joy were springing up, as by enchantment, from a regenerated earth.

Jean-Charles Harvey,
Sackcloth For Banner, P. 71

From Louis Hémon's *Maria Chapdelaine* to Roch Carrier's trilogy, the theme of sacrifice in French-Canadian fiction has been a persistent one. In the record of pioneer life in such earlier works as Hémon's novel and Brother Marie Victorin's *The Chopping Bee and Other Laurentian Stories*, the frontier dream of racial and religious cause sustains a community of faith, to which the individual willingly pays obeisance. In this literature, the renunciation of individual desire and the abrogation of individual will are in the interest of a higher authority — of divinity. The sacrificial act is a sacred one that promises the immortality of the soul and the immortality of the French race.

For, historically, it seems that the French Canadian frontiersman was motivated by a sense of providential destiny and divine inspiration. He approached the black forests of the New World and sacrificed himself with a messianic zeal and sublime martyrdom to the future Catholic French nation. Mgr. L.F.R. Lafleche, writing in 1866 on "The Providential Mission of the French Canadians", expounds "a constant truth, . . . that *Providence has allotted each and every nation its own mission to fulfill, its own predetermined goal to attain.*"¹ The new land is likened to that which God promised Abraham, a land that will endure everlastingly for those yet unborn [p. 94]. With Old Testament fervour, the frontiersman welcomed even the ultimate sacrifice, death to the glory of God. Speaking of "the mystic and military colony of Mont-Royal",² Canon Lionel Groulx exclaims:

Of those men, who prayed while clearing the land with their muskets always within reach, who took communion every day, and who volunteered their services as soldiers of the Virgin in constant expectation of death, not one

was beneath heroism. One day, when one of them was reproached for exposing himself too much, Major Closse (for it was he) replied in his characteristic, impatient way: "Sirs: the only reason I have come here is to die for God, in the service of arms; and were I to be assured that I should not die for Him, I should leave this country and serve against the Turks, so as not to be deprived of that glory." [p. 189]

While the priestly ideal of the elected Catholic glory may be historically questionable as motivation for the frontiersman, at the very least it is a truthful one in the mythology of fiction. The archetypal pioneer figure, Maria Chapdelaine for example, discovers in the face of death a melancholy peace, for "Death is but a glorious preferment, a door that opens to the joys unspeakable of the elect."³

As the novels of Phillippe Panneton and Germaine Guèvremont testify, the habitant, undaunted by the Conquest, continued quietly to beat the tribal drum. Excluding the outlanders of an impinging world, he turned inwards, grasped the land and bred its children. Possessor and possessed, he insured the sacred heritage. In the novels, *Thirty Acres* and *The Outlander*, the landowner's sacrifice becomes trivial — reproachable. As the frontier vanishes, ownership replaces the conquering spirit, and struggle for possession supersedes mystical faith. The supernatural bargain becomes a practical one. Whereas Phillippe Aubert de Gaspé in 1863 could glorify in *Seigneur D'Haberville (The Canadians of Old)* the simple purity and faith of the habitant, could speak in an impassioned way of the habitant selling fish for the deliverance of souls in purgatory ("There is nothing more beautiful than this communion between Catholics and those of their kindred and friends that death has taken from them, their solicitude extending even to the invisible world"⁴), in Guèvremont's *The Outlander*, written in 1945, we encounter Didace, who considers the property to be left to his heirs more important than his own salvation. While Didace is willing to pay in masses for not having "the Devil spurting flames at my backside through all eternity,"⁵ ultimately, fear for his property . . . eaten up [p. 227], takes precedence over his eternal soul. In both *Thirty Acres* and *The Outlander*, classic novels of habitant life, the Canadian's paternal egotism and pride of possession infects human relationships. The sacrifice to tribe becomes, then, a stagnant and, in *Thirty Acres*, a malignant act. In the latter, Panneton is, of course, delineating the death of an old order as Euchariste Moisan is victimized both by self and by the modern world, which can no longer be excluded.

In the fiction of the more modern novelists, with the intrusion of external forces and the loss of spiritual conviction, the ancient Gallic dream becomes a nightmare. The "one mission (rôle), one interest and one idea", the stubborn heedlessness François-Xavier Garneau celebrated as the "occult force of cohesion and of resistance" which would proclaim French endurance,⁶ is an unfulfilled prophecy. For the disenchanting, the progressive and the intellectual, the French mission is translated into a puritanical, death-obsessed church, supported by a backward peasant pietism. In André Langevin's *Dust Over the City* and Roch Carrier's *Floralie, Where Are You?*, the community, united in ignorance, is a destructive force, and the sacrifice of the individual becomes an act of despair. In Giles Marcotte's novel, *The Burden of God*, the central character, a young priest, is overwhelmed by his understanding that life is irremediably doomed, and that the Vocation and death are twin sisters.⁷ And Carrier's speculative lament for Philibert in *Is It The Sun, Philibert?*, "He devotes his whole life to preparing for failure,"⁸ reverberates in both Langevin's novel and Robert Elie's *Farewell My Dreams*, where the only exits for the characters are existential isolation or suicide. For these critics of the French-Canadian dream, death has become, tragically, the Canadian's way of life.

Although the modern rebel may attack the psychology of martyrdom, he, at the same time, perpetuates the subject — the literary pattern of sacrifice and death. In fact, this persistent theme is complicated by various and complex perspectives. Nonetheless, its resolution in the wake of the frontier, the land and the modern world is best illustrated by such characteristic fiction as *Maria Chapdelaine*, *Thirty Acres*, *Farewell My Dreams*, *Dust Over The City* and by the work of French Canada's popular contemporary spokesman, Roch Carrier.

In Louis Hémon's *Maria Chapdelaine*, both Samuel Chapdelaine and Maria's lover, François Paradis, are inspired by the frontier spirit. Hémon is careful to point out that neither man can be content on the land for they are a different breed from the settlement farmers:

It was the everlasting conflict between the types: pioneer and farmer, the peasant from France who brought to new lands his ideals of ordered life and contented immobility, and that other in whom the vast wilderness awakened distant atavistic instincts for wandering and adventure. [p. 56]

For these men, and finally for Maria herself, the black forest, mysterious and powerful, issues an undeniable challenge. The persuasion of the primitive, the forest with its "darkly stretched" "battle-front" [p. 258], combines with the French mystical sense of mission, as Maria, torn between leaving and staying at the end of the novel, hears the Voice of Quebec and commits herself to a life of sacrificial endurance:

It came to her with the sound of a churchbell, with the majesty of an organ's tones, like a plaintive love-song, like the high call of woodsmen in the forest. For verily there was in it all that makes the soul of the Province: the loved solemnities of the ancestral Faith; the lilt of that old speech guarded with jealous care; the grandeur and the barbaric strength of this new land where an ancient race has again found its youth . . .

'Strangers have surrounded us whom it is our pleasure to call foreigners; they have taken into their hands most of the rule, they have gathered to themselves much of the wealth; but in this land of Quebec nothing has changed. Nor shall anything change, for we are the pledge of it . . .' [pp. 259-60]

The "occult" force of "etourderie" is fully realized in *Maria Chapdelaine*, for in this sacrifice to the communal good is a mystical apprehension of a unity, a oneness that defies external reality and uplifts the individual. Since the will of God is manifested in the divine mission, the will of the individual and that of God merge in a holy, transcendent purpose. In the voices that tell her the way, Maria experiences what Hal Bridges suggests in *American Mysticism* is the classical mystical experience, that "selfless, direct, transcendent, unitive experience of God or ultimate reality".⁹ In these moments of mystical exaltation, the suspicion that the "world and life were cheerless and gray", that the "daily round" is "brightened only by a few unsatisfying, fleeting pleasures" [p. 112] is forgotten, and submission is assured. And these moments, which move pioneer and habitant alike, are generated by the mysterious rituals of the church in combination with nature's mystery, the ritual of the seasonal cycle, of death and rebirth.

On Christmas Eve, all are emotionally aroused by the Christmas mass, the joyful celebration of generation, and "pervaded with a deep sense of the supernatural" [p. 127]. Their thoughts linger with the image of the redemptive child, the "little Jesus", a new-born infant in his mother's arms, "who might be loved without great effort of the mind or any thought of the coming sacrifice" [p. 135]. Maria is overcome by the "passion of religious feeling", her love of François, the

sound of voices about her [p. 138]. She finds her heart fused in the single emotion of love, at once earthly and, in the prevailing "exaltation of spirit", divine [p. 139]. Samuel Chapdelaine also approaches divine inspiration after his daughter's ritualistic visit to the supernatural agent of God, the curé. After Maria's lesson of obedience and duty, he rouses himself in his sled to sing in "full-voiced fervour" . . . "Adorons-le dans le ciel" [p. 166]. And Madame Chapdelaine, while waiting for her men to "make land" in the spring, is possessed with "something of the mystic's rapture" [p. 72].

Significantly, the beauty and ecstasies of Madame Chapdelaine's vision are based on the conquest of the forest and an erotic identification of the fertile mother earth in the summer season. She gladly anticipates what will be: "the quiet, unaffected loveliness of the level champaign . . . the naked champaign courting with willing abandon the fervent embraces of the sun" [p. 72]. High priestess to the earth and to the sun, that ancient symbol of fertility, she sings the great deeds of the four Chapdelaines and Edwige Légaré, "their struggle against the savagery of nature, their triumph of the day" [p. 72]. The will to conquer and to participate in the rebirth of nature's fertility where "every mighty force of nature is working as a humble slave" [p. 254] for man invokes the individual's sacrifice to hardship. The identification with the natural cycle is total and fulfilling. For Maria, at the end of the novel, the pain of bereavement in the household is secondary, for it is followed "by the naked earth . . . lying ready for the seed, and mourning must not delay the season's labours" [p. 263].

This adoration and sacrifice to the land is emotional, almost sexual in character, and illustrates a primitive, animistic view of the natural world. The maternal principle, which plays a great part in French-Canadian psychology and mythology, is partially incorporated in this concept of an earth mother, a concept which many anthropologists suggest arises with the growth of rural, agricultural society.¹⁰ From the mystical perceptions of the characters who cultivate the land, the earth is both sentient and female. The five men who "make land", clearing from day to day, uncover "deep wounds" in the soil, showing its richness [p. 73]. With the approach of winter, the men hold back the threshing, encouraging the meagre grain "to steal a little nourishment from the earth's failing veins" [p. 116]. In the winter, a mask covers the earth's face, and in the spring, she is "like some lovely girl released

at last from an evil spell by touch of magic wand" [p. 239]. While a just and retributive "Power" [p. 103] is the ultimate authority for the Canadian in *Maria Chapdelaine*, Mother Earth compassionately invites a hopeful sacrifice.

In communion with the natural world, the pioneer develops a primitive, religious mythology. As the earth is personified with the suggestion of divinity, so are the natural elements. The local weather god has his own power [p. 73], the winds rule the sky [p. 102]. The great cast-iron stove that contains the fire and life is the soul of the house, the enemy of cold and his "ministers of death" [p. 158]. Individual will is obliterated and sacrifice insured both by the forces of nature, which teach obedience and respect, and by the promise of earth's regenerative power. For Maria Chapdelaine, then, the deep unrest of her spirit and the desire that comes upon her to "escape and be free" [p. 190] are ultimately quelled by the expectation of rebirth, a rebirth enjoyed seasonally in the earth's awakening, and one that holds its future promise in the predestined salvation of the chosen French Catholic race.

Yet, for the father of Maria Chapdelaine, the tilling of the land has very little attraction. He has taken up wild land five times, and having broken it, lost interest. Samuel Chapdelaine attacks the forest compulsively, in an attitude Ronald Sutherland describes as a "kind of masochism".¹¹ While self-castigation, pain and penance are part of the character's Catholic theology, the forest, as seen by the pioneer Maria, her father's child, seems to invite a vague Thanatos yearning towards self-obliteration. In the season of the dead, the winter woods particularly exercise a strange and fascinating beauty. There is the suggestion of eternity in the measureless woods with its universal whiteness, its life "so unhurried that one must needs have more than the patience of a human being to await and mark its advance" [p. 31]. And the alien, unfriendly world is sometimes "strangely beautiful in its frozen immobility, with a sky of flawless blue and a brilliant sun that sparkled on the snow" [p. 123]. There isn't in this novel the sublime horror of death one discovers in Aubert de Gaspé's *Seigneur D'Haberville*, where the spectacle of the habitant Dumais, suspended hopelessly above the primitive grandeur of the moving ice floe, is viewed by the crowd in its "appalling sublimity" [p. 55], but the atavistic yearnings awakened in Maria's father are suggestively of this

order: that romantic, primitive attraction to death itself, heightened by proximity to nature's majesty.

While the attitudes expressed in Hémon's novel may be interpreted in today's world of Godless computer logic as mere shackles of the past, and Maria's obedient self-sacrifice viewed as a pitiful, perhaps even a twisted act, the form of the fiction is as relevant as true artistry ever is. The mystical inspiration of the characters and the ritualistic form of their lives lend to the novel a moving, sacramental spirit. The picture of the Chapdelaines on Christmas Eve is memorable in its lyricism. The quiet tones of Father Chapdelaine's haunting hymns of beauty and love, as he gazes dreamy and remote, intermingle with Maria's slender voice, as she chants her thousand Aves. And the threatening beauty of the winter world, the sensual pleasures of the summer, are realized with the same lyrical power. Maria gazes out "at the snow-covered ground which the moonlight has turned into a glittering extent of some magic texture, like to ivory and mother-of-pearl — at the black pattern of fences outlined upon it, and the menacing ranks of the dark forest" [p. 142]. In the summer, there is a quiet celebration of sensuality, in the "green of tender grass and young wheat . . . of ravishing delicacy" [p. 95], in the sumptuous festival of the berry-picking, where the "strident flight of heavy grasshoppers rose above the intoxicated clamour of the flies" [p. 98]. One is caught by the magic and beauty that is part of Maria Chapdelaine's world.

Mother Chapdelaine's paradise lost [p. 45], the clear and cultivated land, is a paradise regained in the classic novel of habitant life, Panneton's *Thirty Acres*. But the tentative questioning of the urban outsider, Lorenzo Suprenant in *Maria Chapdelaine*, "There is no man in the world less free than the farmer . . . You are their slaves . . ." [pp. 180-81], has now become a chilling reality. The mystical lyricism of the communal pioneer sacrifice, such an ideal vision as Brother Marie-Victorin's metaphor of the Cross of St. Norbert in "The Wayside Cross":

These two out-stretched arms were no longer the work of man, but the Canadian land itself, throbbing with its millions of invisible lives, and ardently gushing forth with its evening prayer. It was the Christian land, which in the universal sinking to rest was making its sign of the Cross for the night.¹²

is replaced by a sacrifice to land and race that is seen as futile and avaricious. Panneton's perception of both Euchariste Moisan, and later,

his son Etienne, in their slavery to the land is not so much, as many critics have suggested, "realistic", as it is disillusioned. And with a surgeon's eye and skill, he exposes what has become the diseased side of the French-Canadian inheritance. Through his central characters he projects the spiritual malaise of a Godless tribe.

In *Thirty Acres* the ancient Gallic prophecy is disintegrating. As the outer world invades the closed community, the authority of Divine Providence becomes questionable and the worship of the sacred agrarian deity is transformed into an obsessional, possessive and community-infecting act. The concept of enduring race is no longer viable as the urban world and its values beckon and intrude. Consequently, Euchariste's defense of Divinity and mission to his son, Ephrem, enticed, as he is himself, by a profane, urban world, is hollow:

You shut your mouth! . . . Don't you remember what he [the Bishop] said? Didn't he say it was us, the people in the country, who are the real Canadians, the real folks? He said when a man loves the land it's just like loving God, Who made it and Who takes care of it when we deserve it. [p. 112]

The habitant in part, as Panneton sees it, turns to the land from disillusionment, for the earth, unlike people, is dependable. Yet this is a perverse and static commitment. With historical understanding, Panneton perceives that as the frontier has receded the land has closed in on the habitant. His reserves are narrow, overworked strips of land which have been persistently eroded, and because they still bear fruit the Canadian does not see that the face of the earth is now "the overpainted face of an old woman" [p. 18]. And the worship of the thirty acres, which suggests to Euchariste the place where "Christ had been crucified" [p. 18], promotes a true crucifixion of human relations. It invokes a substitute sexuality, displacing a sympathetic, sensitive relationship between man and woman.

In their adoration of the land, both Euchariste and Etienne are the genuine habitant. For Euchariste, she is the all-demanding goddess of fertility, "the Mother of Harvests" [p. 108], under the white blanket, "ever a virgin and yet each year bearing fruits" [p. 137] — a deity who through her rebirth provokes submission. And for Euchariste, his wife is nothing more than an extension of the ritual. Her function is like the earth's, to wait patiently until spring when "the sun would fertilize it once again" [p. 23]. Etienne, like his father, follows the same course.

He sees the earth as doing everything on a grand and generous scale, "whether it accepts man or rejects him, allows the plough to penetrate its fertile womb, or indifferent to human despair, arches its back to the hail pelting down on its fleece of yellow wheat" [p. 132]. For the author, it is the indifferent acceptance of human despair in the face of the land that is disturbing. The sacrifice seems too great when ritual revokes humanity, as Alphonsine withers and dies and Euchariste Moisan's only sign of grief is the putting on of a black tie.

The sacrificial act is no longer a consecrated one, for the community of love and mystical apprehension of deity in *Maria Chapdelaine* is dead in *Thirty Acres*. The habitant is driven now to sacrifice others out of a compulsive need to possess and insure his own self-worth against members of his own community. Euchariste sees the birth of his eldest son, Oguinase, as an act consecrated to insuring the continuity of the family and a gift to the farm, an instinct surviving from a bygone age ("the dim impulse to personify the earth, who was still the daughter of Heaven, the spouse of Time, the beneficent and fruitful goddess to whom one offers the first-born of the flock and the first fruits of the harvest" [p. 67]), but this is no longer the divine sacrifice of Abraham's Isaac to a higher authority. For, "above all, Oguinase confirmed Euchariste in his sway over the heritage of Uncle Ephrem" [p. 67]. In *Thirty Acres* the French-Canadians' struggle for possession has turned in upon themselves. There is, for example, a malign inverted tribalism in the author's depiction of the failure of human relations between Ephrem, Etienne and the father. Etienne takes a "malicious pleasure" in ferreting out the favoured son's motives. In order to counter-balance the unspoken alliance between father and brother, Etienne characteristically seeks solace by contracting an enduring bond between the land and himself: "each year it became more absolutely his mate and his mistress, his suzerain and slave" [p. 151]. If, from Panneton's point of view, there is no longer a genuine Abel and the mark of Cain brands them all, still, his despair and criticism are generated by the ancient tribal dream.

From a detached and progressive vantage point, he sees that centuries of servitude have bred a stubborn and dumb passivity which little separates the habitant from his animals. Yet curiously, the author perpetuates the racial vision, albeit self-castigating, as he explains, sincerely, the compulsive passion to possess land, in racial terms. The

thirty acres, which means more to both Euchariste and Etienne "than his own family or his own person" [p. 95], is a result of the "Norman's greedy vindictiveness" and the priest of the parish has the "same, avid, suspicious Norman blood" [p. 41]. It seems that for Panneton, the racial mission and the sacrifice are polluted and misdirected but, perhaps, not invalid. There is a note of ironic despair in his comment that in the course of a few generations the family Schlitz "descended from German mercenaries" became accepted Canadians in the community, for "who would remember that a few drops of alien blood flowed in their veins?" [p. 53]. Similarly, there is a hostile echo in his statement that country has now become "a matter of soil and not of blood" [p. 53].

Moreover, neither does he totally reject the ritual of the land or the sacrifice to its maternal principle. The question of male-female relations is an unresolved one. While he points out that "the eternal duel", the conflict between the sexes, takes place more openly in the city than in the country, where man is the antagonist of "the earth who is female too" [p. 118], the relationship between the sexes in the urban setting is tragic and ugly. Ephrem's English wife is a corruption and travesty of maternity; Lucinda, Euchariste's daughter, in her anti-puritanical revolt, probably is the prostitute, Violette, in the city. As well, there is still some element of consecration in the sacred soil, in this "kindly mother who was both generous and exacting" [p. 123]. The old hope, the *mythe agricole*, revives once again as Euchariste Moisan, in the novel's conclusion, amidst the horror of the modern world which demands even a bleaker sacrifice on the part of the individual, dreams of nature's cycle and "the enduring stability of the land" [p. 229]. It appears that the Gallic vision of regeneration ultimately holds in the novel, for, while the catalytic sun may be "puny and fitful" [p. 26], seen from a French-Canadian point of view, *Thirty Acres* is an agonizing novel of French-Canadian soul-searching, but a "birth-agony holds the promise of new life".¹³

In the more contemporary fiction of André Langevin, Robert Elie and Roch Carrier, French-Canadian introspection, like the neurotic mental anguish of the young doctor in *Dust Over The City*, has become "like a wound ceaselessly probed by a sick man's finger".¹⁴ The habitant's fatalistic philosophy in *Thirty Acres* that "the road leading from the past was measured by the deaths left scattered along the way"

[p. 38], is a legacy that, in a contemporary context, is heightened to an overwhelming *angst* — a dreadful anxiety that death is both the present and future way of life. In the novels of Langevin and Elie, the old, inspired *etourderie* has degenerated into the psychological dilemma of existential inertia. And in Elie's work, what might be described in terms of Russian literature as the hero's acute Oblomovism culminates in self-extinction.

In Elie's *Farewell My Dreams*, the community of faith has totally collapsed and the characters exist in hostile, isolated alienation. For Marcel, the tragic character who suffers the tortures of the damned, struggling to survive the ugliness of urban Montreal and struggling to escape from sinking into the "bog of memories",¹⁵ they are all dead souls, without past, future or religion [p. 168]. If the "future seems sealed" [p. 87], Marcel tries desperately to circumvent it by stripping himself of all impotent illusions and dreams; his mission is to confront the reality of the living present with all its possibilities. As he tells his wife, "We reach a point where we have to question ourselves about our life. We are aware that it does not lead anywhere . . . We are facing the future alone, or rather all our future is what we are" [p. 174]. Marcel's quest is for a liberation into life and for a salvation he believes lies within himself.

This shadow arouses my curiosity. I suspect in it a whole universe; each soul must contain one such universe, and this is my soul, if the word has any real meaning. I must penetrate this shadow for there lies salvation and the promise of joy, of assurance which I have never known. [p. 123]

In this voyage of self-discovery, Marcel's method is to have faith in reality and "hope for understanding only from contact with other human beings" [p. 124].

Paradoxically, his gesture towards life is a puerile one. He seems to be held in the grip of an impotent determinism, "defeated in advance" [p. 165], and instead of capturing joy or vigour or even the "hazards of freedom" [p. 68] denied him by his society, he becomes increasingly trapped and isolated within his own mind and inert body. His passivity is only offset by the gradual development of an objective to this quest — that of an affair with his wife's sister, Louise. When the "shape" of "his desire" [p. 176] is finally realized, she denies him the understanding he seeks and the self-acceptance he deems necessary to endure. There is, however, a curious ambivalence in Marcel's final gesture. On

the one hand, it is the ultimate act of freedom and defiance against Catholic teaching. It may even be the ultimate sensual act, for as Jean-Charles Harvey suggests, in the quest to live, the "whole gamut of sensations" runs "from the enthrallment of art to the foretaste of suicide".¹⁶ Yet, if Marcel in traditional Catholic terms is anti-Christ who in this novel achieves a certain liberation, he also, as the eternal French-Canadian martyr doomed in the modern world by forces out of his control, achieves a certain conventional grace.

In a sense, *Farewell My Dreams* is a very poor novel. The existential vacuum of modern urban man is a situational cliché, which in this novel has simple and rather obvious ramifications for the French Canadian in the underground position. If "Life is dreadful" [p. 207], then it is more so for the French Canadian, doubly hopeless about the future. Yet Elie does manage to execute quite dramatically Marcel's suicide as he follows the traditional pattern of what I see as the French-Canadian literary myth. Marcel's act of self-obliteration may be one of existential choice, but in the last analysis it becomes, dramatically, that splendid futuristic sacrifice for the communal good. For Bernard, Marcel's friend, discovers that "Like Marcel, we must turn towards the future, but if we try to walk alone we will find only emptiness" [p. 212]. Life's summons must be answered, destiny, although dark and unknown, must be met. Marcel's death commits the characters in the novel to future understanding of one another and for Bernard it "had allowed him at last to rejoin the others" [p. 213]. While *Farewell My Dreams* is a novel of black despair, in its conclusion, that classic, moving ritual of sacrifice, death and re-birth is dramatized once again.

Like Elie's novel, Langevin's *Dust Over The City* is a novel of extreme introspection and self-questioning, a novel that in the mental monologue of the central character represents not only an individual's dilemma but the greater tensions of the modern French-Canadian psychology. The narrator is a young doctor, Alain Dubois, who takes his new wife, Madeline, to a mining town where he begins his first practice. For the young doctor, who rejects traditional values and beliefs, his hope and salvation is not that which the church promises, but a taste of happiness with Madeline, whose attraction is in her animal and sensual vitality, her defiant gestures of freedom against puritanical convention. What he hopes to gain with his beautiful wife, her hair a "stream of red lava" in the sun, is to "grasp eternity in her, to

know the voluptuousness of immortality" [p. 149], to grasp her spirit. Alain himself is in the static, underground position, following roads that lead nowhere, those "cul-de-sacs in which we remained imprisoned for life" [p. 130], and his quest for salvation and truth rests on the religion of the sensual present — on the possibility of Madeline freeing him. As she denies him this experience and defeats him by flaunting her affair with a young man from the community, his spiritual death and passivity are assured. He becomes progressively trapped in a state of spiritual and psychological decay. Life becomes for him a fleeting illusion, a deception of happiness. He feels himself rotting, encrusted with mould, and the dust of the city infiltrates his soul and reduces him to immobility. "I lay down on the rose sofa, my soul covered with dust. I felt peaceful and calm, like the dead" [p. 125].

Alain is, in a sense, the symbolic French-Canadian man, incorporating the ancient Gallic *etourderie*, which in the modern world is a death-in-life posture [beneath the youthful mask of his face, he feels wrinkled, old (p. 129)], seeking liberation from the stagnating community and religious values by the old method. As the town closes in on them with their pitiless eyes for the immorality of their situation, he decides "to fight them with the strength of inertia — their own strength" [p. 141]. Ultimately, this stasis courts the final death. Both he and Madeline are sacrificed to the town, as the priest arranges the marriage of Madeline's lover to a young girl, and Madeline kills herself in despair. For Alain, the loss of his wife is the defeat of his quest for identity and salvation.

Superficially, while it appears that Alain has also been sacrificed to Madeline, for whom he gradually develops a paternalistic and charitable desire to shield from divine injustice (and the will of the town is part of this justice), Langevin's conception of his character's situation is rife with metaphysical complication. The paradoxical superman conviction of the underground position, the egotistical God-in-me posture of Dostoyevsky's defeated character re-enacted endlessly in existential literature, is particularly relevant to the French Canadian. The ancient, messianic, communal sense of godliness is transferred to the individual, the doctor in *Dust Over The City*, who places both Madeline and her lover in an equivocal state, as he condones and entertains their affair (through pity, he says). Madeline's suicide is provoked then both by her

husband and by the town and its priest, the priest, who, as the contemporary French-Canadian man, is still the divine missionary. By placing his wife in this guilty state of limbo, the doctor then is not only victim but victimizer. The French-Canadian mission is tragically, perhaps even ironically, inverted in this character who, god-like and arrogant, explains:

I would continue to struggle. God and I, we were not finished with each other yet. And perhaps we carried the same arms: love and pity. But I worked in the ranks of men. I could not deal with world affairs and entire species. I cared for men. Naturally, our points of view were different. [p. 215]

While there is in this fiction a quest for individual liberty, for freedom from communal and religious morés, the whole movement of the novel is towards spiritual and physical death, a death engendered both by the old standards and revolt against them. And Langevin truly captures in the imagery and atmosphere of death, the poetry of despair. When the young doctor, without the benefit of religious conviction, encounters death [a topic which he believes is an obsession with the Catholic masses (p. 76)], he can only mourn; in death, "The envelope of flesh is torn, and that is all" [p. 44]. If to colour external reality with a sacrificial vision is a French-Catholic inheritance: "The red lights in front of the Benson mine stained the white, powdery blanket with splashes of blood" [p. 55], Madeline in her struggle for the pleasures of the moment comes to be "dead without hope" [p. 155]. Consequently, the doctor wonders, "was the priest right when he frightened his parishioners with the sadness of the flesh?" [p. 155]. It seems that in *Dust Over The City*, the myth of regeneration may still be a possibility for, in one sense, the doctor's decision to stay in the town is a community commitment. While he seeks to provoke the town with his presence, and to inundate it with pity, his may be a mission both catalytic and regenerative. One is tempted to view the country woman, delivered by the doctor of the hydrocephalic baby, as a possible metaphor for the novel. Although the birth agony has brought forth an unnatural child, still it is a first child and the mother is young.

In the fiction of Roch Carrier, there is no longer any such hope. For this urbane and progressive writer dedicates his classical statements of French-Canadian psychology and myth to those "who sought the dawn but found only night".¹⁷ While Carrier is at the same time introspective participant and external observer, his direction is a morose indictment

of a backward and puritanical peasant pietism, which woos death not life. In his nightmare allegory, *Floralie, Where Are You?*, he explores the inner life of the Catholic peasant mind and argues against the sun of Hell, of ravenous flames and damnation which preserves death, in favour of the sun of love and beauty, of life. Like earlier novelists such as Jean-Charles Harvey, who revolted against priest-ridden Jansenistic Catholicism, the author proclaims the "sun of thought, sun of nature, sun of love!"¹⁸

While the young girl, Floralie, seeks to escape the demonic wilderness of the French-Catholic psychology where emphatic perceptions of bestiality, sin and damnation define life as "profound regret, confession and penitence" [p. 104], her desire to embrace joy in living is thwarted. The "marvel of being a girl", the "marvel of being alive" [p. 21] she experiences with the young Italian who takes her virginity and teaches her to smile, is erased by her first sexual experience with her husband, Anthyme, who, ignorant and fearful, couples like an unnatural animal. Moved to hatred by his possessive fear that his wife is a "fallen woman", Anthyme brutally assaults Floralie and stifles forever her expression of love. Carrier suggests in this relationship that the Catholic theology which dictates that individual lives are thorns buried in the head of God, that the Devil created the body and the senses [p. 104] robs one of the experience of life. From Carrier's point of view, the sacrifice of Floralie to the ancient French community, where one lives to die and is not allowed to dream, is a tragic one.

Carrier is not, however, a simple moralist. At the same time as he damns damnation, he invokes its perverse beauty and the French-Canadian participation in its obscenity. The sublime horror of the Thanatos urge is conveyed in his black romantic imagery. Like the Byronic pleasure in the putrefaction of death on a beautiful face, Floralie imagines, in glorious imagery of decay, herself burning in infernal flames, as big as the sun; "consumed without smoke or ashes, consumed like a rotting fruit" [p. 29]. And hers is an erotic embrace of death:

But just as the heavenly sun kissed her body there in the clearing, so the other sun would take hold of her one day. Its rays would come to lick her body, so pale in its coffin. She would feel its bite. When someone touched her brow he would feel only the cold of death and no one except Floralie would know that the sun of Hell was devouring her already, each of its rays like a huge famished worm. [p. 29]

As Floralie is lost in the forest, the mystical pioneer myth of compelling death assumes another dimension: that of the beauty of damnation in death. It seems that if the French Canadian cannot salvage life, he can, at least in his embrace of death, add to the wonder of heaven, its antithesis, the perverse experience of an erotic hell.

And in the third novel of his trilogy, *Is It The Sun, Philibert*, Phil, sacrificed to the external enemy, *les maudits Anglais*, meets his death in a torrent of blood, a crashing metaphor of the entire French-Canadian sacrificial vision:

The phosphorescent Cross of Christ rose up before Philibert like a tree on the road in front of his car. The outstretched arms sparkled like glowing coals and the gaping wound in the side of Christ was as broad as a neon city. He slammed on the brake but the wheels didn't cling to the pavement. It sank like a sword into the side of Christ and a tide of blood poured down on the wind shield. The wipers managed to clear a semi-circle but it was no use; their mechanism had broken down. Blood soaked the upholstery, flowed onto the seats, stained Phil's suit and trickled onto his eyelids and his eyes, and the car was filled with the blood of Christ. [p. 94]

Carrier brilliantly explores the French-Canadian dilemma in his contemporary martyr's last moments as Phil is dissuaded from life by the symbolic snake who tells him, "to be alive is a curse", and by a monstrous vision who mocks him, "You are suffering . . . You have always wanted to suffer" [p. 99]. But, if the sacrifice is, in part, tragically self-imposed by the French-Canadian legacy, it is also curiously beautiful. For the pain of death is balanced by its apocalyptic sublimity:

The flames were stirred by the movements of the maddened creatures and the earth decomposed in jagged sparks, but the fire darkened, the flames turning grey. The light was dusty and no longer held back the night, which became entirely black again. The untouchable black vault of the sky hurtled down on Phil, and the weight of that cartload of bricks overturned on him. [p. 99]

While Phil's sacrificial body, representative of the larger racial one, may be scattered in the "abyss of a dead memory" [p. 96], the night-time reality of death is also comforting, "like a mother" [p. 99]. It seems that the French Canadian is trapped not only by the hopeless profanity of his environment, but trapped as well by his love of sacrifice and death, a love which Carrier paradoxically presents as carrying a certain splendid consummation and repose.

Yet this is not a holy sacrifice. For the modern neon Christ figure, there is not the ancient assurance of sacrificial reward. In fact, the "sweet agony" [p. 98] Philibert experiences in his vision is that of the vitality of Hell, a vision that Carrier ironically implies identifies the situation and the psychology of the French Canadian only in this world; beyond the jaws of death it is irrelevant. Finally, in the pathetic wonder of what Phil thinks are his last words, "Is that the sun?" the reader is left wondering with him, wherein lies the salvation?

In the more modern literature of Quebec the mystical pioneer sacrifice of dying to the world is an insufficient act. This is a "beautiful and good world where man comes but once, eager to taste the fruit of life before draining the cup of death",¹⁹ but the French Canadian like Philibert, often finds himself hopelessly adrift in a complex world he is ill prepared for. Religious conscience must make room for social conscience as the old ways break down, and the French Canadian finds himself in an urban setting without the mind or motivation to deal with it. As Jean-Charles Harvey explained as early as 1934:

One or two generations back, no farther, you find the peasant. The whole race comes from that stock. As long as our people dwell on the farm, near nature, they display the richest gifts of humanity: integrity, gentleness, orderliness, abrogation, self-sacrifice, sincerity of faith and morals . . . Take them and try to initiate them to intellectual life after their three centuries of tillage or forest tradition. The main result is to throw them adrift . . . [p. 225]

Yet, in the rejection and often, the damnation, of the childhood of their past, the Quebec writers paradoxically follow the ancient ritual. Theirs is a fiction of soul-searching, of pain and penance, motivated by a plea for community change in the hope of future salvation. Perhaps the secret of their literary art lies in the very richness of this collective mythology. What is more certain is that the French-Canadian phoenix dies a hard death.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Mgr. L.F.R. Lafleche, "The Providential Mission of the French Canadians," in *French-Canadian Nationalism*, ed. Ramsay Cook (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1969), p. 95.
- 2 Canon Lionel Groulx, "If Dollard Were Alive Today," in *French Canadian Nationalism*, ed. Ramsay Cook (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1969), p. 189.

- 3 Louis Hémon, *Marie Chapdelaine*, trans. W.H. Blake (Toronto: The Macmillan Co. of Canada, 1921), p. 233.
- 4 Phillipe Aubert de Gaspé, *Seigneur D'Haberville (The Canadians of Old)*, trans. Georgiana M. Pennée (Toronto: The Musson Book Co., Ltd., 1929), pp. 127-28.
- 5 Germaine Gûevremont, *The Outlander*, trans. Eric Sutton (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Co., 1950), p. 227.
- 6 Francois-Xavier Garneau, "Preliminary Discourse to History of Canada," in *French Canadian Nationalism*, ed. Ramsay Cook (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1969), p. 79.
- 7 Giles Marcotte, *The Burden of God*, trans. Elizabeth Abbott (New York: Vanguard Press, Inc., 1964), p. 138.
- 8 Roch Carrier, *Is It The Sun, Philibert?*, trans. Sheila Fischman (Toronto, Anansi, 1972), pp. 60-61.
- 9 Hal Bridges, *American Mysticism: From William James to Zen* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), p. 4.
- 10 Olof Pettersson, *Mother Earth: An Analysis Of The Mother Earth Concepts According to Albrecht Dietrich* (Berlingska Boktryckeriet, Lund 1967), p. 14.
- 11 Ronald Sutherland, *Second Image* (Toronto: New Press, 1971), p. 4.
- 12 Brother Marie Victorin, *The Chopping Bee and Other Laurentian Stories*, trans. James Ferres (The Mission Book Co., Ltd., 1925), pp. 92-93.
- 13 Albert Le Grand, Introduction to *Thirty Acres*, trans. Felix and Dorothea Walter (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1960), xiv.
- 14 André Langevin, *Dust Over The City*, trans. John Latrobe and Robert Gottlieb (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1955), p. 66.
- 15 Robert Elie, *Farewell My Dreams*, trans. Irene Coffin (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1954), p. 65.
- 16 Jean-Charles Harvey, *Sackcloth For Banner*, trans. Lukin Barette (Toronto: Macmillan, 1938), p. 129.
- 17 Roch Carrier, *Floralie, Where Are You?*, trans. Sheila Fischman (Toronto: Anansi Press, 1971), Preface.
- 18 Jean-Charles Harvey, *Sackcloth For Banner*, p. 76
- 19 Jean-Charles Harvey, *Sackcloth For Banner*, p. 225.