

Claude Jasmin's Fictional World

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The narrators of Jasmin's five novels all inhabit the same universe: one of incessant travel and flight.¹ The very style of the novels, the short, hurried sentences, the rapid narration, the series of events juxtaposed like scenes in a very fast film, all convey the urgency of this flight. The narrator of *La Corde au cou* is fleeing from a murder he has committed; Paul in *Ethel et le terroriste* is escaping after carrying out a bomb attack in Montreal; Gilles in *Pleure pas, Germaine* is leaving behind a city he can no longer bear and a series of humiliating, senseless jobs; André in *Délivrez-nous du mal* is in flight from homosexual entanglements with Georges, and from "cet ennui qui me colle à l'âme . . . depuis toujours" (p. 27). Even the narrator of *Et puis tout est silence*, who never physically travels—since he is trapped in the wreckage of a barn he was transforming into a theatre—travels in his mind into the past and tries to flee a life he believes he has wasted in study and pointless projects. These characters are fleeing a society which rejects them, a civilization they find unbearable, and a past they cannot change. Some flee their families, their parents, and especially their father. Above all, they all run away from themselves.

Like Rimbaud, whom Jasmin admires and to whom he addresses *Rimbaud, mon beau salaud!*, these characters are in search of some ideal, symbolized by the patch of sky on which the narrator of *Et puis tout est silence* fixes his eyes as he lies under the ruins of the barn. Some look for happiness, and Paul in *Ethel et le terroriste* promises Ethel: "Nous serons heureux pour vrai, un jour, quelque part" (p. 30). Gilles, the protagonist of *Pleure pas, Germaine*, as he leads his family, like Moses leading his people to the Promised Land, seeks the Good Life, which Germaine promises they will find in Gaspésie. They are all looking for innocence,² purity, and the lost paradise of a childhood which they constantly evoke. If their childhood was unhappy, they look for the paradise it should have been, and their search is symbolized by their desire for a father figure to replace their real father. Hence, the narrator of *La Corde au cou* tries to find Ubald, who once gave him all the kindness and security his own father refused, while the narrator of *Et puis tout est silence* tries to replace knowledge of his father's inadequacies by memories of a time when his father seemed a hero. André in *Délivrez-nous du mal* tries to replace a repressive father, remembered as a cruel, vengeful God whom he addresses as "mon père qui êtes dans votre bureau" (p. 182), by the loving Father/God of Christianity.³

The countryside in Jasmin's novels also symbolizes the goodness and innocence which his characters seek.⁴ In *Et puis tout est silence*, there is the park in the midst of Montreal and the lake where the narrator spends his holidays. The narrator of *La Corde au cou* finds peace in contemplating the countryside in the early morning, and in the beauty of Ubald's farm, while André, the main character in *Délivrez-nous du mal*, seeks peace on his sister's farm. But it is Gilles in *Pleure pas, Germaine* who best shows the beneficial effects of the country. At the outset of his journey he is irritable with his children, blames his wife for the recent death of their eldest daughter, and openly admits he is not a good husband. Slowly he softens to the joy his children show in the

countryside. He joins in their games and is filled with tenderness for them. His love for his wife, Germaine, grows more evident, until he stops blaming her for their daughter's death. He even finds himself hesitating over his plan to kill his daughter's supposed murderer, and says: "J'suis rendu comme tout mou, tout attendri, c'est la beauté de ces paysages d'hier" (pp. 130-31). People they meet grow nicer as they get further from Montreal, and the brother-in-law who refuses them shelter gives way to the uncle who welcomes them, the Scotsman who shelters them, and the lady who feeds them.

Whatever their goals, Jasmin's characters have no rest, and more important than their goals is flight itself. It is their very nature to flee. André in *Délivrez-nous du mal* is only at ease when driving his car, and the narrator of *La Corde au cou* is restless all his life. Gilles's family, as depicted in *Pleure pas, Germaine*, seems to have always been on the move from one home to another, and Gilles says of his own life: "Ça fait b'en des années que je suis la route" (p. 116). Not surprisingly his son wants to be a sailor, as Gilles himself once did. Paul and Ethel in *Ethel et le terroriste* dream of traveling to Florida—as does the narrator of *La Corde au cou*—and they watch longingly the aircraft taking off from New York.

Flight is often a cause of deep suffering, and Paul describes it as "Un chemin de croix dément" (p. 43). Jasmin's characters, as they flee, are pursued by a sense of persecution. Paul and the narrator of *La Corde au cou* are fleeing from real pursuers, but the others are pursued by memories and regrets. The past is always with them, and both the narrator of *La Corde au cou* and André, the protagonist of *Délivrez-nous du mal*, blame their upbringing for their present plight. But more insistent even than memory is a sense of guilt. (And, of course, two of them are guilty of real crimes.) The voice narrating the novels often adopts an accusing, harring tone.⁵ Gilles, the narrator of *Pleure pas, Germaine*, accuses himself of being a failure, and André in *Délivrez-nous du mal* believes he is a weakling. The narrator of *Et puis tout est silence* accuses himself of having wasted his life, while the narrator of *La Corde au cou* is pursued by guilty memories of the girl he has murdered.

In the midst of their flight, these characters feel terribly alone. As French Canadians, they feel themselves a threatened minority, while Paul in *Ethel et le terroriste* is even an outcast in the political movement to which he belongs because he refuses to abandon Ethel. The latter is Jewish, and is also, therefore, part of a minority. André in *Délivrez-nous du mal* also belongs to a minority because of his homosexuality. All feel cut off from their fellows, and the narrator of *Et puis tout est silence* is typical of them, as he lies under the wreckage of the barn, trying vainly to attract the attention of passersby. André laments: "Et surtout, je serai seul, je serai bien seul, je serai tout à fait seul au milieu des autres" (*DNM*, p. 177). It is because he feels alone and yet needs to belong that Paul in *Ethel et le terroriste* joins the Movement and accepts carrying the bomb. It is also for this reason that he feels such joy when handed a motel key and is able to open a door. The narrator of *La Corde au cou* also seeks to open the door into polite and cultured society, tries to gain access to a "smart" review and acts as an escort for Micheline, the daughter of a wealthy family, on her periods of release from a mental institution. But every time, the door is closed on him, "toujours cette porte, cette porte affreuse qui se refermait" (p. 207). Denied access to this society, he commits murder, and is irrevocably cut off from all his fellow men, except a few outcasts like the café waitress who befriends him, the old man who helps him escape, and Alice, who is an outcast in her family too.

Little wonder that Jasmin's characters feel like lost children. Paul tells Ethel: "Nous sommes deux orphelins" (*ET*, p. 53), and asks her: "De quel côté s'en aller? Nous ne sommes que des enfants" (p. 133).⁶ They feel their very identity slipping from them as they are forced to hide in New York and obtain new identity papers. Paul wonders in anguish: "Qui suis-je devenu?" (p. 121). All his life he seems to have been playing a role, and now he no longer knows who he is or what is real. "Nous nageons dans le mensonge" (p. 10), he tells Ethel. The narrator of *La Corde au cou* also plays a role in order to gain access to cultured society, while Gilles's children actually do play roles in a television production (*PPG*, pp. 96-102). The narrator of *Et puis tout est silence*, because of his interest in the theatre, has spent his life playing roles, and talks of "Ce goût de nous déguiser, d'être quelqu'un de différent" (p. 24). This life of pretence finally destroys him. The madman who kills him, and who dresses in various theatre costumes scattered around the wreckage, is a symbol of the narrator's past, of his pretences and disguises.

Worse than playing a role is having one imposed, and the characters who reject their father are also rejecting an imposed identity, and an upbringing which predetermines what they are to be. The narrator of *La Corde au cou* rejects his father because he blames his own character on his father's cruelty. André in *Délivrez-nous du mal* is terrified of resembling his father, but learns that his homosexuality is probably shared by his father. This man, in his turn, is a creation of his father, who pushed him into a particular career and a certain attitude to life. It is easy to imagine André's horror as he hears his brother-in-law planning that his children become doctors, lawyers, and engineers.

The reaction to this hostile environment which rejects the individual and denies his identity is an outburst of violence, a violence conveyed by the very style of the novels, with their explosive, breathless sentences. The real goal of Gilles's journey in *Pleure pas, Germaine* is to kill the man he believes to have murdered his daughter, and who becomes a symbol of the city, with all its dangers. André in *Délivrez-nous du mal* decides to kill Georges to rid himself of the evil he feels pursuing him. The narrator of *La Corde au cou* kills Suzanne when he finds her in bed with the rich and influential Driftmann. He is motivated by jealousy, but also by hatred of the society Driftmann represents. The lie he tells to put Micheline back in the mental institution is also an act of vengeance against a wealthy group which rejects him. He even kills Ubald when the latter betrays him to the police. His reaction to adversity is always violence and the desire to intimidate. "J'aime faire peur" he says (p. 156), and steels himself against friendship and charity as traps others set for him. He seems to be proved right when one man who shelters him decides to hold him for ransom. Paul in *Ethel et le terroriste* also takes violent action by carrying out a bomb attack, and the Movement to which he belongs is clearly inspired by hatred.

An outlet is also sought in dreams, and dream sequences—often in italics—are introduced into all the novels. This is obviously a form of escapism, another kind of flight. Evocation of the past and nostalgia for childhood is clearly linked to this escape into dreams. Reality, of course, never lives up to such dreams. Germaine remembers her childhood through a haze of nostalgic idealization, but realizes in a more lucid moment: "C'est comme ça, les souvenirs d'enfance, ça exagère toujours, ça embellit" (*PPG*, p. 95). The narrator of *La Corde au cou* finds that Ubald's farm and house have changed from his idealized memories, and Ubald, the loved father figure, betrays him. The narrator of *Et puis tout est silence* realizes: "Je vais y crever si je ne trouve

pas un moyen plus efficace de me sortir d'ici, que de rêvasser à mon enfance" (p. 59). In fact, he does die under the ruins of the barn, which can be seen as the ruins of his illusions. The madman who kills him also represents his past, and is explicitly linked to the past when the narrator says he reminds him of somebody he knew when a child.

The narrator of *Et puis tout est silence* tries to make his dreams into something constructive by incorporating them into art. He turns to the theatre and attempts to make role playing into an act of communion, to "jeter entre l'inconnu, ce mystérieux peuple des multitudes, et moi, une passerelle, une voie qui pourrait nous faire communiquer ensemble, abolir ce rideau opaque que tissait ma perpétuelle rêverie" (pp. 68-9). It would seem, however, that his attempt to commune with the masses fails, since his theatre literally collapses on him. Jasmin himself seems to have rejected traditional theatre and literature as a means of communion with ordinary people. In his many articles on the problems of bringing culture to the masses, he seems to have concluded that only television and cinema can do this, and he appears to have abandoned the novel.⁷ He blames artistic and intellectual milieux partly for this failure, and depicts such milieux in his novels as snobbish, pretentious, and scornful of the uneducated.⁸

The only happiness which Jasmin's characters (with the exception of André in *Déliurez-nous du mal*) do find is in love and tenderness shared with another character. Jasmin writes: "Le bonheur, chaque fois que je le trouve un peu, est surtout là. Là où il y a femme,"⁹ and the same is true of his characters. *Ethel et le terroriste* (one chapter of which is called "La Carte du tendre"), as well as being the story of a flight, also tells of the love of Paul and Ethel. Their love is even stronger than Paul's political convictions, so he abandons the Movement rather than give up Ethel. As for Ethel, even after she learns somebody was killed by Paul's bomb, she cannot leave him. Hate is replaced in their lives by love. In *Pleure pas, Germaine*, Gilles's love for Germaine grows until it replaces the hate he feels for the supposed murderer of his daughter. Even such a hate-filled man as the narrator of *La Corde au cou* expresses tenderness and love for the girl he has killed.

Love and sexual appetite are presented as manifestations of the life force, of the drive to live despite all adversity. They are part of the will to be happy and to live now, and the narrator of *Et puis tout est silence* is a warning against neglecting this will. He regrets years spent in sterile study rather than in living, and now that he has met Mariette, books and museums seem dead. He tells himself that "il n'y a que l'heure présente qui compte, que cet instant de bonheur et de plaisir" (p. 147). As he lies dying, he realizes no books can ever save him. Unfortunately, nor can love, for he has waited too long before turning to it. When Mariette discovers him, he is almost dead, and she cannot bring help in time. Paul, in *Ethel et le terroriste*, who discovers love in time, pities those political militants who devote themselves to hate, and have no time for living. There is one symbolic scene where he makes love to Ethel, while, on the television, are sounds of battle, gunshots, and cries of pain. They, however, hear none of this, for it is shut out by their love.

It is because they stifle the will to live that Jasmin attacks certain artistic and intellectual circles. In *La Corde au cou*, they are shown as sterile and opposed to all initiative, while in *Et puis tout est silence*, they are contrasted unfavorably with the narrator's new love of life. In this latter novel, we are also shown a girl, Lucille, who has been turned into a wreck, unable to love or feel normal

appetites, by contact with these milieux. For the same reason, Jasmin attacks the Church, which, he says, has always placed fear of man's appetites before love, and tried to suppress the will to live: "Peur de Dieu avant amour de Dieu, peur du sexe avant respect du sexe, on peut déclarer la peur notre emblème, nos armoiries, notre drapeau, notre patrimoine, notre foi, notre tradition sacrée."¹⁰ The Catholicism of French Canadians is too superficial, he argues, to be a life-giving force. André's Catholicism as depicted in *Délivrez-nous du mal* is too feeble, as is the religious conviction of the narrator's father in *Et puis tout est silence*. The latter novel refers to "une foi si peu vivante qu'elle rendait ses adeptes semblables à un troupeau de bêtes bêlantes que l'on mène avec lenteur aux abattoirs de la tiédeur, de la tristesse, et de la mort de l'âme" (p. 78).

When talking of the influence of the Church, Jasmin is clearly enlarging his scope beyond the narration of the private life of a few individuals. It is always tempting to see political and social allegory in the literature of Quebec, but this is especially the case with Jasmin, who has always taken a stand for the independence of Quebec, and who has said: "Il faut s'engager, je n'en démordrai pas, il faut éviter la tour d'ivoire des gens-de-lettres qui se disent 'libres' mais qui ne font que se ménager tous les intérêts."¹¹ But perhaps it is less a case of allegory than of reflecting instinctively a reality which Jasmin sees around him, for he believes that "l'écrivain normal doit refléter correctement la communauté dans laquelle il vit."¹² He is also protesting against the society he depicts, a protest conveyed by the very violence of his style. He has written: "Aussi je proteste contre la société chaque fois qu'il m'est possible de voir que son organisation empêche la vie réelle, la vie vraie, la vie normale."¹³

It seems legitimate, therefore, to see Jasmin's characters as symbols of the situation of the *Québécois*. When, in *Ethel et le terroriste*, Paul tells of the difficulties he experienced in finding places where he could make love to Ethel, Jasmin is expressing the difficulty Quebec has in affirming its will to live. The fact that Jasmin's characters all belong to a minority, fear for their identity, and feel isolated in an alien environment has obvious applications to the situation of Quebec. Their search for a father and their feeling of being lost orphans clearly represent Quebec's sense of abandonment. The use of "joual" in *Pleure pas, Germaine* is also a reflection of and a protest against a language corrupted by anglicisms, "un langage pollué, une forme pervertie par les facteurs socio-économiques débilissants et maintenant connus."¹⁴ Even André's homosexuality as depicted in *Délivrez-nous du mal* can be seen as symbolic of the state of Quebec, for Jasmin writes of "notre rôle d'invertis que l'étranger, le conquérant de cette nation, nous fait jouer malgré nous," and adds: "Nous sommes les pédérastes, les valets, les troubadours latins, à petits gages, les fous-du-palais, de l'autre nation."¹⁵

Above all, the revolt of Jasmin's characters against their situation represents the will of Quebec to live and maintain its heritage. Their situation does, however, seem desperate. The narrator of *La Corde au cou* is condemned by his childhood, before he even commits murder, and the rope he carries knotted around his neck symbolizes the fate awaiting him. The narrator of *Et puis tout est silence* is condemned by a past which literally collapses on him. Paul's flight in *Ethel et le terroriste* is hopeless, and he is soon found by Canadian agents in New York. Gilles in *Pleure pas, Germaine* is continually warned there is no work and no future for him in Gaspésie. André in *Délivrez-nous du mal* is condemned to a sterile existence by a homosexuality which is presented almost as a hereditary curse. *Québécois* too seem condemned by a hereditary curse, by their past history of submission, by their position in an English-

dominated continent, and in *L'Outaragasipi* they are presented as dominated by English culture and language, abandoned from the very beginning by France.

But Jasmin refuses to abandon hope. He speaks in *L'Outaragasipi* of the new will *Québécois* are showing to be independent, looks forward in *Rimbaud, mon beau salaud!* to a time when French-speaking peoples everywhere will commune, unhindered, with one another, and when all nations will be free to develop in their own way.¹⁶ He is encouraged in *L'Outaragasipi* by the tradition of revolt among Quebec patriots and by the fact that the French language has even survived in Quebec. He has faith in the young, and makes le père Jobidon in *Pleure pas, Germaine* speak with admiration of young militants who have a faith his generation never had. "J'pense que ça a pas de prix, l'espérance, la confiance," the old man says (p. 150).

There is a progression in Jasmin's novels from the hate-filled characters of the early ones, from the sense of wasted time in *Et puis tout est silence*, murder in *La Corde au cou*, and deadening "ennui" in *Délivrez-nous du mal*, to joyous delight in life, love, and sex in the remaining two novels. This progress represents Jasmin's growing belief in Quebec's will to live and be free. In *Ethel et le terroriste*, Paul rejects sexual and racial taboos, and chooses life over hatred and death. Yet he, and the other characters, also cling to their origins and birthright. Germaine and Gilles in *Pleure pas, Germaine* return to their rural origins as they travel to Gaspésie, while Paul and Ethel in *Ethel et le terroriste* think longingly of Quebec, and eventually return there. Even the narrator of *La Corde au cou* is returning to his origins as he makes for Ubald's farm, for this is where he feels he belongs. Flight is pointless, or, as Paul puts it: "Nous appréhendons qu'il est bien inutile de nous en aller, de voyager, de fuir" (*ET*, p. 111).

These characters are like Jasmin himself, who clings to his origins, and writes: "J'ai comme un grand cordon ombilical, une longue racine. Je suis bien accroché. Je pourrai aller vagabonder pas mal loin et seul. Je saurai rentrer."¹⁷ But he is also proud of Quebec's connection with France, and argues that *Québécois* are not orphans, but have a long history and origins in a great culture. He writes with pride: "Or nous sommes des colons, fils de colons et notre berceau est tout entier là-bas, il est riche et puissant d'histoires navrantes et exhaltantes."¹⁸ And, whatever one may think of Jasmin's separatist beliefs, one has to respect his love of his own language and culture, his pride in his history, and his belief in freedom and independence. Whoever reads his novels and experiences what it is to be a fugitive, afraid for his very existence, knows how it feels to be part of a minority whose existence is threatened, and is therefore closer to understanding Jasmin and *Québécois* like him.

NOTES

¹I have used the following editions of Jasmin's novels in this study: *Et puis tout est silence* (Montreal: Editions de l'Homme, 1965), *La Corde au cou* (Paris: Laffont, 1961), *Délivrez-nous du mal* (Montreal: Editions à la Page, 1961), *Ethel et le terroriste* (Montreal: Déom, 1964), and *Pleure pas, Germaine* (Montreal: Parti Pris, 1965). Page references for quotations are placed after the quotations.

Jasmin has also written three other works which he calls "récits": *La Petite Patrie* (1972), *Pointe-Calumet boogie-woogie* (1973), and *Saint-Adèle-La-Vaisselle* (1974). These are, however, volumes of an autobiography, so, although they have many points in common with the fictional works, I have not studied them here. All three are published by La Presse (Montreal).

²On this point see François Gallays, "Claude Jasmin et le retour à l'innocence," *Livres et Auteurs Québécois 1967* (Montreal: Editions Jumonville, 1968), pp. 191-197.

³Gilles in the play *Tuez le Veau gras* (Montreal: Leméac, 1970) also tries to replace a father who has never really understood him by a father figure called Ubald. Léo in *Blues pour un homme averti* (Montreal: Parti Pris, 1964) spends the whole play in search of a father he has never known.

⁴Ethel and Paul, the protagonists of *Ethel et le terroriste*, and André, the hero of *Délivrez-nous du mal*, all love the city too, but even they are aware of the ugliness of Montreal and New York.

⁵In the play *La Mort dans l'âme*, published in *Voix et images du pays IV* (Quebec: Les Presses de l'Université du Québec, 1971), pp. 135-173, Jasmin exteriorizes the hero's guilt and gives the accusing voice to a character (never seen, except from behind), who questions and accuses him.

⁶In the play *La Mort dans l'âme*, the negro spiritual "I feel like a motherless child" is played, and Georges and Madeleine are described as "deux orphelins illuminés, campant au milieu d'un désert" (p. 147).

⁷See the following articles by Jasmin: "Commentaires II," *Littérature et société canadiennes-françaises*, ed. Fernand Dumont and Jean-Charles Falardeau (Quebec: Presses de l'Université Laval, 1964), pp. 194-198; "Les Ecrivains et l'enseignement de la littérature," *Liberté*, 10, No. 57 (May-June 1968), 66-72; "La Plaie du corporatisme chez les écrivains," *Le Devoir*, 31 Oct. 1967, pp. VI and XI.

⁸See also Jasmin's article "L'Intellectuel contre le peuple," *Liberté*, 2, No. 5 (Nov. 1961), 698-710.

⁹*Rimbaud, mon beau salaud!* (Montreal: Editions du jour, 1969), p. 141.

¹⁰L'Intellectuel contre le peuple," p. 702.

¹¹*Jasmin par Jasmin* (Montreal: Claude Langevin, 1970), p. 64.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 89.

¹³"Claude Jasmin" in *Le Roman canadien-français*, Archives des Lettres Canadiennes, III (Montreal: Fides, 1964), p. 356.

¹⁴*Jasmin par Jasmin*, p. 72.

¹⁵"Commentaires II," p. 198.

¹⁶See *L'Outaragasipi* (Montreal: Editions de L'Actuelle, 1971), pp. 121, 194-195; *Rimbaud, mon beau salaud!*, pp. 50, 126-127; "L'Intellectuel contre le peuple"; "Commentaires II."

¹⁷*L'Outaragasipi*, p. 206.

¹⁸*Rimbaud, mon beau salaud!*, p. 42.