

Alain Dubois's Commitment: A Reading of *Poussière sur la ville*

The closing pages of André Langevin's *Poussière sur la ville*¹ have been the subject of much speculation since that novel was first published. What is the meaning of Alain's claim that he will stay and make a place for himself in the town? The critics' responses range from complete rejection of that desire as a hopeless impossibility to guarded acceptance of it. Roger Godbout sees Alain Dubois's attempt as doomed from the start: "Les personnages principaux souffrent d'un état d'oppression psychologique et physique qui les menace constamment. Ils se révoltent contre les institutions pour tenter d'échapper à un sort unanime; cette révolte est vain et se solde le plus souvent par une faillite totale."² Gilles Marcotte sees the novel as "un dépassement une victoire sur la nuit"³ in that it is more optimistic than *Evadé de la nuit*, even if the optimism is more implied than real: "Mais cet espoir nous touche plus par l'appel qu'il contient, que par l'ambition qui le sous-tend, et la pitié d'Alain nous semble dérisoire en regard du mal qu'elle veut conjurer."⁴ Robidoux and Renaud write, however, that "la conclusion du roman dans sa signification, reste-t-elle tournée vers la vie."⁵ Jean-Louis Major is perhaps the most forceful in arguing that Alain's commitment is real: "La pitié qu'il vouait à son épouse infidèle, c'est sur eux (les gens de la ville) qu'il la reportera. L'effort sans espoir auquel il se soumettait pour préserver le bonheur de Madeleine, il le leur consacra pour lutter à sa mesure d'homme contre l'absurde mal des hommes."⁶ Major suggests that in Langevin's fictional world, as in Camus's, the character becomes authentic by accepting the cruel absurdity of life and struggling to preserve human values. Ultimately, then, "Langevin croit à la possibilité d'une authentique intersubjectivité."⁷

The following examination of the novel, however, will reveal that no real evolution in Alain's character or perception takes place. The novel comes full circle at the end, as the symbol of Madeleine's ring suggests (p. 196), and Alain is in much the same situation as he was at the beginning of the novel.

The image of the circle, in fact, expresses Alain's attitude at various points in the novel: "J'ai bu le temps au compte-gouttes pour rien, pour voir que ma femme simule très bien le sommeil, pour comprendre que je suis toujours attaché à mon pieu et qu'un nouveau cercle commence. Cela finit par faire une vie" (p. 91). Alain's sense of fatality is represented by the image: "Macklin fait cercle autour de moi et resserrera un jour son étou" (p. 138). The recurring image underlines Alain's intellectual and emotional state as he is shown to feel helpless, the victim of forces beyond his control.

At the beginning of *Poussière sur la ville*, nothing seems to have any inherent value. It is as if one could detach words from their meaning: "j'essaie de trouver un sens aux paroles de Kouri" (p. 12). Even Madeleine's physical being is seen as separate from her identity. "Comme s'il [Kouri] avait levé le rideau et m'avait montré derrière une vitre un être dont j'aurais ignoré complètement l'identité et qui eût été ma femme" (p. 13). Alain's perceptions do not evolve as the novel progresses. They are in fact reinforced. He sees Madeleine as "une forme étrangère à mon amour, un corps qui s'est mis hors d'atteinte pour la nuit et Madeleine qui l'a quitté pour s'en aller ailleurs" (p. 72). Language, too, seems to take on an independent existence: "Le langage a encore des possibilités. Nous expliquer. Quand on met des mots sur les choses, elles s'édulcorent un peu, elles deviennent plus familières et, peut-être, s'abolissent à la fin. On peut se laisser prendre aux mots, accepter leur écran" (p. 99).

Alain finds himself in a state of virtual paralysis in which physical and intellectual communication are impossible. It is precisely this frame of mind which is presented at the end of the novel: "Je veux voir les images une à une, leur donner un sens" (p. 212). Throughout the novel, then, from the beginning to the very conclusion, Alain is alienated from everything and everyone around him, totally unable to impose any order or sense on the events of his life.

The language of his final assertion is contradictory and reflects his alienation: "Je resterai, contre la ville. Je les forcerai à m'aimer" (p. 213). He will remain in the city but in an adversary relationship. The inhabitants will love him, he states, because he will force them to. The language of battle which he has employed throughout the novel to characterize his relationship with Madeleine⁴ is here projected onto the inhabitants of the town. The failure of any future reconciliation is thereby guaranteed.

The continued use of the language of theatre, too, helps undermine Alain's final claim. Alain is always conscious of his life and those of others as role-playing: "La nuit scintille comme un écran de cinéma et le bonheur se découpe en gros plans" (p. 143); "On me trouvera bien un bout de rôle dans une petite scène" (p. 144). At the conclusion of the second part, when Madeleine reveals to Alain the truth about her affair, the latter needs most to take decisive action to salvage their relationship. Instead, he sees himself, once again, as a passive spectator: "Où sont les spectateurs de cette belle scène?" (p. 155); "Nous avons joué la scène jusqu'au bout" (p. 156). While Madeleine and her lover are in his presence he can only treat the situation philosophically: "Je hais que le rideau se lève lorsque je suis sorti de scène" (p. 176). Alain imagines the town's inhabitants reacting to the news of Madeleine's suicide with a total lack of commiseration: "Ils ne seraient pas étonnés d'apprendre demain qu'on a relevé le rideau durant la nuit, qu'un acteur avait oublié une réplique . . . un jeu de scène" (p. 196). This sense of distance, that results in his inability to participate in the shaping of his own life, never dissolves:

Et si je cherche tant à ressusciter leurs deux ombres dans cette pièce, dans ce vide où je me sens perdu, c'est que je sens qu'on m'a arraché des mains la solution. Comme si j'avais parié sur la corde raide et qu'elle s'était brisée, bêtement, parce que j'avais hésité une seconde de trop. Je tenais une des ficelles du destin de Madeleine, mais je ne l'ai su qu'après, quand tout était rompu. La sourde souffrance qui me reste vient de cet instant où je n'ai pas agi. Mais il y a plus de trois mois que le rideau est tombé et on joue autre chose. (p. 205)

Even at the end of the novel Alain perceives life as a play ("Cette pièce" is a pun). People are helplessly manipulated like marionnettes ("ficelles du destin") and after Alain's "play" is over, others take its place ("on joue autre chose"). It is clear, then, that Alain's final "declaration" that he will have the townspeople love him is a momentary gesture not in keeping with his character and hence doomed to failure.

Since Alain is the narrator, his judgement and perceptions are necessarily crucial to the story. However, they are often called into question. In fact, his difficulty in "seeing," both literally and metaphorically, is central to the novel. On a literal level he often seems to be struggling to discern figures and actions: ". . . je distingue mal les formes pliées en deux . . ." (p. 74). There is sometimes an obstacle to prevent his seeing clearly: "Le givre aveugle complètement les vitrines du restaurant et dans la porte je ne vois que la réflexion de la rue" (p. 87); "Les vitres sont couvertes de frimas à l'intérieur comme à l'extérieur et je dois passer la main sans cesse dans la pare-brise pour voir la route" (p. 167).

From the first page the reader is alerted to the complex problem of interpreting the perceptions of the narrator. That his understanding of himself and of those around him are to be the subject of the closest scrutiny is revealed even there:

Une grosse femme, l'oeil mi-clos dans la neige me dévisage froide-ment. Je la regarde moi aussi, sans la voir vraiment, comme si mon regard la transperçait et portait plus loin, très loin derrière elle. Je la reconnais vaguement. Une mère de plusieurs enfants qui habite dans le voisinage. Cela dure une demi-minute au moins, j'en jurerais. Puis elle s'en va d'un pas lent et lourd qui troue silencieusement la neige. J'écrase ma cigarette sur le mur contre lequel je suis adossé et je comprends tout à coup. La bonne femme a dû me croire fou ou ivre. Il est presque minuit. Un vent violent fait tournoyer une neige fine dans la rue déserte. Et, tête nue, sans pardessus, je contemple ma maison.

Dans la cabane de Jim, le chauffeur de taxi, le téléphone sonne sans répit, comme toutes les nuits. Un son grêle, haché par le vent. On a l'impression que le gros Jim est mort et que la sonnerie ne s'interrompra que lorsqu'on aura découvert le corps.

Je refais les cent pas en regardant la chambre de Madeleine, encore illuminée, où la neige tend un illusoire écran.

—Moi, je ne sais pas ce qu'elle vient chercher ici . . . Mais les gens parlent. J'en connais qui ne viennent au restaurant que pour la voir. Moi, ça ne me regarde pas . . . Enfin, je tenais à vous avertir. (p. 11)

The first communication between the narrator and the reader reveals that Alain is aware of being watched and this attention troubles him. He is more conscious of himself as the object of the woman's stare than of the woman herself for he hardly sees her ("sans la voir vraiment"). He is able to identify her only in general terms ("une mère de plusieurs enfants qui habite dans le voisinage") because she represents to him an abstraction and her glance that of all the other inhabitants of the town to which he must constantly submit himself. He is never really free of the glance, for even when she is gone he feels the need to explain himself ("La bonne femme a dû me croire fou ou ivre").

Alain is outside, "tête nue, sans pardessus," on a windy winter's day. He is completely out of touch with and oblivious to his physical surroundings. Yet the milieu reflects a basic truth about him: just as the snow is being whipped round and round (the wind "fait tournoyer une neige fine"), turning in on itself, so Alain's attention is fixed on himself and he is given to introspection. When Alain hears the phone ringing in Jim's room without being answered, he reveals his morbid frame of mind by thinking in terms of Jim's being dead. This paragraph sets the tone for what follows and prepares the reader to establish a critical distance between himself and the narrator.

The presentation of space shifts rapidly in this first page. At first Alain is in front of his own house, then he turns to Jim's, next he focuses on Madeleine's room and finally he is in the restaurant. The quick changes do not allow for anything but cursory glances which lack real depth. Perhaps we are being warned not to confuse Alain's introspection with profundity. The short sentences and paragraphs do not lend a sense of continuity and the result is a series of impressions rather than a unified and coherent thought-pattern. Only the present tense is used, reflecting the narrator's lack of concern for the past and the future and his intense preoccupation with what is unfolding before him.

The words of the last paragraph are presented without introduction and at first one wonders if it is the doctor or someone else who is speaking. It is in fact the restaurant owner, Kouri, who is addressing Alain, but the possibility for confusion is revealing. Kouri's words are communicated directly to the reader just as Alain experiences them. The reader is in this way sensitized to Alain's plight here and during the course of the novel: Alain is constantly being bombarded by words and impressions, all of which are confusing and unintelligible to him. The presentation of Kouri's words in this manner makes it apparent. Alain's alienation, to which we have alluded earlier, finds dramatic expression in this first page as Kouri's attempt at communication is perceived with difficulty both by the reader and by Alain. The reader thereby gains insight into the philosophical dilemma at the heart of the novel—the distance between Alain and the world around him. It is implied in this way, then, that Alain will continue to experience great difficulty in relating himself not only to his physical but also his social milieu.

The reader's understanding of Alain Dubois is therefore framed from the beginning of the novel. He experiences a wide range of emotions during the course of the novel, but the cumulative effect is negligible. In the last paragraphs of the novel the reader is left with Alain's desperate pledge and a recurrence of one of the images that opened the novel—Jim's hut. We have indeed come full circle.

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NOTES

¹André Langevin, *Poussière sur la ville*, 7th ed. (Montréal: Le Cerde du livre de France, n.d.).

²Roger Godbout, "Le milieu, personnage symbolique dans l'oeuvre d'André Langevin," *Livres et auteurs canadiens* (1966), p. 198.

³Gilles Marcotte, *Une littérature qui se fait* (Montréal: HMH, 1962), p. 58.

⁴Marcotte, p. 58.

⁵R. Robidoux and A. Renaud, *Le roman canadien-français du vingtième siècle* (Ottawa: Editions de l'Université d'Ottawa, 1966), p. 137.

⁶Jean-Louis Major, "André Langevin," *Archives des lettres canadiennes*, 3 (1964), 224.

⁷Jean-Louis Major, p. 229.

⁸"L'arme" (p. 38); "combat" (p. 65); "balle" (p. 67); "armes," "se défendre," and "attaquer" (p. 85).