UNE SAISON DANS LA VIE D'EMMANUEL: *A SEASON IN HELL*

J. M. Kertzer

As the new-born Emmanuel surveys the life he has just entered, he reaches a precocious philosophical conclusion:

> il lui semblait soudain avoir une longue habitude du froid, de la faim, et peut-être même du désespoir. Dans les draps froids, dans la chambre froide, il a été rempli d'une étrange patience, soudain. Il a su que cette misère n'aurait pas fin, mais il a consenti à vivre.[1] (9)

In this striking fashion, *Une Saison dans la Vie d'Emmanuel* introduces us to its world of cold, disease, dirt, and lice, which wounds and overwhelms those who inhabit it. It is also a world in which an infant can make stoical judgments about existence. This mingling of the physical and the fanciful is characteristic of the novel, supplying its peculiar tone, texture and, finally, meaning. As we read it, we must find our way through two landscapes: the outer landscape of a Québec winter; and the inner, imaginative landscape shared by the characters. Marie-Claire Blais has described her subject as "Hiver moral, hiver physique," seasons of an inner and an outer world.[2] The novel is based on the ironic, painful, often humorous, always paradoxical interaction of these two realities. Man and the world, subject and object, are alienated yet intimately linked. Together they combine in a diabolical vision of human existence that recalls the poetry of Arthur Rimbaud.

The outer landscape of the novel is immediately recognizable as rural Québec with its institutions, prejudices, and figures of authority. All the values celebrated in traditional French-Canadian literature — church, family, soil, opposition to industrialism — are found here, but in a perverse form. "Ton père ne veut pas l'électricité, et il a raison. Moi aussi je suis contre le progrès," asserts Grand-Mère Antoinette abruptly, as if declaring her right to appear in a French-Canadian novel. Traditional values are undermined even as they are declared. As Madelaine Greffard remarks: "Marie-Claire Blais fait une véritable liquidation de tous les vieux mythes canadiens-français en mettant à jour de façon saisissante, la vie dérisoire

[1] Page references within the text are from *Une Saison dans la Vie d'Emmanuel* (Montréal: Editions du Jour, 1970).

[2] Quoted by Gérard-Marie Boivin, "Le Monde Étrange de Marie-Claire Blais ou la Cage aux Fauves," *Culture*, 29 (1968), 16.

qu'ils recouvraient."[3] Although the world of the novel is familiar, it is also strange. It is ruled by a spirit of perversity that continually distorts our vision, transforming one idea into its opposite; and it is ruled by the imagination of the characters who transform their lives as fast as they live them. As a result, our certainty as to what is "real" weakens. Québec is never named, and we are given little sense of place or direction. The atmosphere is claustrophobic: the horizons are close and there is no going beyond them. No mention is made of foreign countries (although there is mention of a war), and it soon becomes apparent that there are none. Pomme and Le Septième cannot run off to Ontario or the United States because these simply do not exist for them. The world we see is the whole world. Characters live as if in a play by Samuel Beckett where the narrow confines of a stage define all there is of a reality from which there is no escape.[4]

The isolation and dislocation felt within this world are conveyed by the fragmentary style of narration with its shifting point of view, by grotesque characterization, but above all by the confusion of time and space. Monsieur le Curé teaches geography, but has no sense of direction. He tries to find his way to the Noviciat through a white, uniform, directionless landscape:

> Maintenant, quelle direction? Ah! Oui, toujours vers le sud. . . . Ils s'arrêtèrent ainsi plusieurs fois. Du sud, ils se retrouvèrent au Nord, au milieu d'un champs de poireaux. (44)

It is impossible to orient oneself because, especially when viewed through the feverish eyes of Jean-Le Maigre, directions shift as in a dream:

> Malgré tous ses efforts, Monsieur le Curé ne put jamais me renseigner sur les grands vérités de la vie. Je ne sus jamais où était l'Est, et encore moins le Nord, il me semblait que l'Ouest se promenait autour de la maison, la tête basse, comme une personne qui s'ennuie. (59-60)

All the great truths of life are distorted. Time circles aimlessly around the house in the same way. It is measured by the cycle of the seasons and the routines they enforce which, far from being envigorating, make life timelessly and painfully repetitive:

> Demain, à la même heure, on prononcera encore les mêmes paroles, et elle aura encore ce léger mouvement de la tête . . . elle s'étonnera peut-être que la vie se répète avec une telle précision. (14)

A muddle of past and present is conveyed in Grand-Mère's newspapers, which are three months out of date and out of touch with events. Life is essentially uneventful:

---

[3] Madelaine Greffard, "*Une Saison dans la Vie d'Emmanuel*, kaléidoscope de la réalité québécoise," *Cahiers de Sainte Marie: Littérature Canadienne*, 1 (1968), 19.

[4] In an interview with Jean Basile, Marie-Claire Blais said with regard to the realism of her novel: "C'est une fable. Quand je l'ai fini, il ne me plaisait pas tel que, je le trouvait trop réaliste. Je l'ai refait en gommant le réalisme. Mais ça n'allait plus du tout. J'ai repris la première version" (*Le Devoir*, 23 avril 1966, p. 13).

> Grand-Mère Antoinette ne faisait aucune attention à la date, elle lisait la température du printemps en hiver, parcourait les mariages au moment où l'un des époux avait été enterré. (108)

Jean-Le Maigre carries these ideas to the point of absurdity. He claims that only the very young and very old can die, that hunchback girls age quickly, and, in his most involuted claim, that Grand-Mère will die of immortality at an advanced age. Time and space are the basic standards by which man establishes himself in the world, but in *Une Saison dans la Vie d'Emmanuel* even they are uncertain. As Jacques-A Lamarche notes, "il y a durée mais absence du temps; il y a espace mais absence de lieu."[5] The effect of such distortions is to isolate the characters and dislocate their lives, yet to generalize the world they live in. That is, we are no longer dealing just with Québec, but with human existence in general. The particular conditions of French-Canadian life — which make the world of the novel recognizable to Canadian readers — become expressive of the human condition, as Jean-Le Maigre implies when he says sadly: "C'est l'hiver partout."

The most outstanding condition of this wintry world is pain. Everyone in the novel is scarred by physical and psychological wounds. Everyone has, like Grand-Mère, a "blessure secrète" which must be protected. Pomme has his fingers chopped off. Le Septième has cuts and scratches on his face and, finally, a mysterious wound on his neck. Héloïse is marked by her fasts and martyred by "les nocturnes blessures de son corps vaincu." Jean-Le Maigre has a rotten lung and burning marks on his body from the beatings he receives. In a telling phrase, typically combining the trivial and the universal, he sums up the situation: "Les puces nous mangent, dit Jean-Le Maigre, la vie est impossible." In this painful world, the sign of authority is the power to inflict punishment. At home, "le vendredi soir était le soir du châtiment"; in the Maison de Correction, "je pouvais entendre des plaintes étranges, des soupirs. On torturait quelqu'un, il n'y avait pas de doute." Perhaps Marie-Claire Blais deals with children in this novel because they are punished most: they are the most subservient to, and abused by, authority. They are the most wounded, but also the most resilient. Because they have such vitality, they display the conditions of life most forcefully. They combine sensitivity and toughness, innocence and corruption. And those who survive become, like Grand-Mère and Horace, patient, enduring, resigned to the pain they suffer.

Whenever people engage with the outer world, they are injured and humiliated. They avoid the eyes and judgments of others because the worst shame, especially for children, is to be exposed and vulnerable. Imagery of trials and condemnation colours their fantasies, expressing fear at the verdicts of authorities which are always harsh and merciless. "Pas de pardon ce soir," sings out Grand-Mère as the children assemble to receive their weekly punishment. Héloïse's most painful dream is of a public confession at which her love letters are recited and her inmost secrets mocked:

[5]Jacques-A Lamarche, "La thématique de l'aliénation chez Marie-Claire Blais," *Libre,* 88 (juillet-août 1966), 30.

> L'âme d'Héloïse avait été mise à nu, non seulement son âme, mais son corps . . . et que ses passions les plus silencieuses, ses amours les plus contenues, l'avaient reniée d'une manière dégradante. (87)

Théodule furtively avoids the "regard sévère" of the mothers of his young victims. Jean-Le Maigre's last vision is of a solemn tribunal of Jesuits, interrupting his happiness and condemning him to death. Consequently, in self-defence all characters turn inward; they retreat within themselves. Emmanuel's first response to life is to withdraw from it: "Il avait peur. Il diminuait, il se refermait comme un coquillage." All characters seek refuge by erecting barriers between themselves and the outer world. If Grand-Mère has a "fraîcheur endormie" deep within her, she keeps it well hidden beneath her voluminous skirts. The men hide behind their pipes, beards and newspapers. Mademoiselle Lorgnette withdraws to her platform which isolates her from compassion and contact with others:

> Oh! Puis-je m'asseoir près de vous, Mademoiselle puis-je me coucher sur votre pupitre, je me sens faible, très faible.
>
> —Personne ne montera sur mon estrade, dit Mademoiselle, en secouant son chignon. (63)

Jean-Le Maigre and Le Septième constantly seek shelter in the cellar, in the latrine, in bed, and in books:

> —Je te vois Jean-Le Maigre, dit Grand-Mère, tu te crois à l'abri mais je te vois.
>
> —Tu ne peux pas me voir puisque personne ne me voit quand je lis, dit Jean-Le Maigre. (14)

The prime motive of each character is escape, and the story traces their efforts to do so. Imagery of capture, imprisonment, and torture suggests the confinement they feel within the family, within society, within life generally. It is countered by imagery of escape, often of the flight of birds:

> Je prendrai mes ailes et je m'envolerai. . . . Toi, tu resteras ici, tu te lèveras à six heures et tu iras couper du bois. Moi je volerai dans le ciel comme une colombe. (31)

In opposition to the cruel, winter world are evocations of a pastoral, summer escape:

> Mais en été, les bois nous mettaient à l'abri de la furie de notre père, et nous avions moins peur de la Maison de Correction. Le Septième passait ses journées dans les arbres. Il mangeait des cerises et crachait les noyaux sur ma tête. Allongé sur l'herbe, je me laissais réchauffer par le soleil. (71)

Above all, escape means a retreat into subjective worlds which characters create to suit themselves. "Ma tête est un aquarium où nagent les choses," writes Jean-Le Maigre in one of his poems, indicating the undersea world of the imagination where he feels most at home. This is a realm of freedom and wonder, of the children's games played by the two brothers where pretence masks reality. It is the underworld of crime where Le Septième finds a romantic and anarchic freedom:

> Le soir même, il mettait le feu à l'école. Dans mon désespoir, je l'ai aidé un peu.
>
> —Si tu m'aimes, disait Marthe, allume toute l'école pour me faire plaisir. (66)

It is the world of poetry through which Jean-Le Maigre transforms life into something magical and passionate. In the young poet's imagination, the sordid life of his sister "se transforma en roman," and even his brutish father is partially redeemed as the smoke from his pipe forms letters, words, and, finally, whole novels. He rewrites and romanticizes his own life by composing his "oeuvre posthume." In this context, the importance of his role as liar becomes apparent. Jean-Le Maigre delights in telling lies because a delightful falsehood is always preferable to an unpleasant reality: "Comme j'ai bien mangé, disait Jean-Le Maigre, étonné de mentir encore, et surtout de mentir si joyeusement!" (22) The poet is the most accomplished of liars, creating beautiful illusions which displace yet illuminate reality. Through his lies, he refashions himself and his world; yet his fictions disclose a truth which is otherwise hidden. If Jean-Le Maigre's "autobiographie" is a "flot de mensonges," it nevertheless expresses a poetic truth that makes its author prophetic. He playfully yet accurately foresees the fate of members of his family: his imaginative visions eventually correspond to reality.

When Jean-Le Maigre's predictions come true, the novel comes full circle. It opens in a familiar world made strange because viewed through the eyes of an infant. Following Emmanuel's example, other characters examine the outer world, and they too find it painful and humiliating. The narrative point of view shifts to record their observations, showing how each gazes at life through his own obsession or passion or pain. Reader and characters suffer a gradual "dérèglement de tous les sens" because the means of observation (the point of view) and of measurement (time and space) grow increasingly capricious. The world becomes nightmarish and chaotic, forcing characters to withdraw into an inner world of dreams where they find — like Jean-Le Maigre, the poet-prophet; Le Septième, the thief; Héloïse, the prostitute — that their dreams take them back to the reality they had fled. Their dreams come true. As the circle closes, however, the reader attains a wider perspective. For him, the chaos subsides into a series of paradoxes, which are not resolved, but are set forth in an orderly fashion. Their ordering principle is at the heart of the novel, and it is here that we encounter the influence of Arthur Rimbaud.

Normand Leroux draws attention to the title of the novel "avec sa résonnance légèrement judéorimbaldienne,"[6] combining "Emmanuel," the name given to Christ as Son of the Virgin (*Isaiah* 7:14, *Matthew* 1:23), with an echo of Rimbaud's prose-poem, "Une Saison en Enfer." In fact, echoes of Rimbaud become quite distinct, and comment on Marie-Claire Blais' novel as a whole. Jean-Le Maigre, the boy who declares with delight that "les poètes goûtent A LA DEBAUCHE," resembles the young Rimbaud, who deliberately put that belief into practice. In "Une Saison en Enfer," he traces his descent into a phychological, moral, and poetic hell:

> Le malheur a été mon dieu. Je me suis allongé dans la boue. Je me suis séché a l'air du crime. Et j'ai joué de bons tours à la folie.[7]

Like poetic Fausts, both youths experiment with the "alchimie du verbe," the magic of poetry which grants mysterious powers that can transform the world. Both indulge their taste for the sombre, evocative and romantic:

> je croyais à tous les enchantements. . . . J'écrivais des silences, des nuits, je notais l'inexprimable. Je fixais des vertiges.[8]

Similarities between the two young poets are striking. Rimbaud's portrait of the artist as a young man, "Les Poëtes de Sept Ans," could be, in part, a description of Jean-Le Maigre, reading secretly in bed, studying in the latrine, imagining romances of escape:

> il était entêté
> À se renfermer dans la fraîcheur des latrines:
> Il pensait là, tranquille et livrant ses narines.
> . . . . . .
> À sept ans, il faisait des romans sur la vie
> Du grand désert, ou luit la Liberté ravie,
> Forêts, soleils, rives, savanes.[9]

Jean-Le Maigre is proclaimed a poet by the crown of lice (rather than laurel) he proudly wears, which recalls Rimbaud's poem "Les Chercheuses de Poux," in which a child delights in having lice removed from his hair. Héloïse too has a counterpart in Rimbaud's poem "Les Premières Communions." On the eve of her first Communion, a young girl lies in bed and is shaken by "un frisson surhumain" as she confuses religious rapture with adolescent sexuality, her love of Christ with sensual love. The painfully ecstatic account of Héloïse in her bed corresponds to the description in Rimbaud:

> Elle veut, elle veut, pourtant, l'âme en détresse,
> Le front dans l'oreiller creusé par les cris sourds,
> Prolonger les éclairs suprêmes de tendresse,
> Et bave . . . —L'ombre emplit les maisons et les cours.[10]

---

[6]Normand Leroux in *Livres et Auteurs Canadiens* (1965), p. 51.
[7]*Oeuvres Complètes de Arthur Rimbaud* (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1954), p. 219.
[8]*Oeuvres,* pp. 232-33. [9]*Oeuvres,* pp. 77-78. [10]*Oeuvres,* p. 90.

Héloïse struggles with her "Époux cruel"; Rimbaud satirizes his lover, Paul Verlaine, as "l'Époux infernal."[11]

The value of invoking Rimbaud in this discussion lies not in exact correspondences between him and Marie-Claire Blais, but in the light his work sheds on her novel. In "Une Saison en Enfer," he details an experience which has set a pattern for many modern writers. It is a mission of self-corruption, self-discovery, and poetic discovery. He announced his plan in his famous "Lettre du Voyant" where he claimed that the poet becomes prophetic only through the purification of suffering. He "cultivates" his soul by disordering and punishing it until he achieves a vision of the unknown. He enters the heart of darkness. In view of the insight it provides into the character of Jean-Le Maigre, the letter is worth noting in detail:

> Le Poëte se fait *voyant* par un long, immense et raisonné *dérèglement* de *tous les sens*. Toutes les formes d'amour, de souffrance, de folie; il cherche lui-même, il épuise en lui tous les poisons, pour n'en garder que les quintessences. Ineffable torture où il a besoin de toute la foi, de toute la force surhumaine, où il devient entre tous le grand malade, le grand criminel, le grand maudit, — et le suprême Savant! — Car il arrive a l'*inconnu*! Puisqu'il a cultivé son ame, déjà plus riche, plus qu'aucun![12]

And having lived through hell, the poet is worthy of a glimpse of heaven. This is the quest attempted and abandoned in "Une Saison en Enfer." Jean-Le Maigre playfully adopts this program, and he too becomes a seer, though his visions are coloured by the pervasive irony of the novel and by the fact that this visionary remains a precocious and pretentious child. But Rimbaud was only seventeen years old when he wrote this letter and nineteen when he wrote "Une Saison en Enfer"; and all Jean-Le Maigre's qualities and quirks — his self-conscious devotion to suffering, disease, blasphemy, magic, mystery, sexual perversity, madness, crime — find their antecedents in Rimbaud's letter and poem. Jean-Le Maigre aspires to be a junior Rimbaud as he writes a "Journal d'un homme à la proie des démons," and his autobiography is his account of his own descent into hell.

Une Saison dans la Vie d'Emmanuel, like *Under the Volcano* and *Beautiful Losers*, is a literary descendent of Rimbaud's influential work. Jean-Le Maigre has his season in hell, which is also his brief season on earth. When he turns from the outer world into the imagination, he has, we are told, "pris son envolée," taken flight. But the path he follows is not that expected. He does not soar like a dove, but finds instead: "Fortuné et moi, avions commencé notre descente en enfer." On this journey, he endures the "nuit des Catacombes" in the Maison de Correction and the "sauvage paradis" of the Noviciat where he meets "le Diable" in the form of Frère Théodule. His family shares his experience. Le Septième forms with him an "alliance de diables"; Pomme, wounded and confined to hospital, "à n'en pas douter, était en enfer"; Héloïse's "Époux vengeur" is devilish. The nature of Jean-Le Maigre's hell is suggested in one of his poems:

---

[11] *Oeuvres*, p. 228. [12] *Oeuvres*, p. 270.

Ma tête est un aquarium où nagent les choses
Tes crimes et les miens,
Comme des chevaux de mer. . . . (33)

When characters retreat inward from a reality too painful to face, they then discover a new reality which is equally painful. The inner world, too, is violent, frightening, perverse. It contains "Tes crimes et les miens," as well as exotic sea-horses. Characters cannot escape from reality because they recreate it in a fantastic and visionary form. Robert Buckeye writes in an unfavourable review of *Une Saison dans la Vie d'Emmanuel:* "Its subject is poetic creation in Wallace Stevens' sense of the term — the imaginative faculty's attempt to create the outside world in its image, an effort doomed to failure unless it conspires with the reality outside it."[13] Developing this suggestion, however, it might be argued that, from the characters' points of view, the fusion of inner and outer worlds is all too successful. There is a great conspiracy with reality led by the young poet, Jean-Le Maigre. The "real" world is not abandoned, as had been hoped, but drawn into the innermost refuge where it contributes to a paradoxical and infernal vision.

In this vision, white winters are "Des saisons noires comme la mort," and an old woman tending a dying man can share "les dernières joies de son mourant." Jean-Le Maigre's hell results from the poetic fusion of reality and imagination. This is the final truth of the novel, the final landscape to be explored. It is like the nightmarish, fable-like world of Marie-Claire Blais' earlier novel, *La Belle Bête,* which has been defined as a "univers clos, uni, et torturé,"[14] a suitable description of hell. In *Une Saison,* too, she provides a diabolical vision of a universe of perverse and painful contradictions. To chart this world is to examine the paradoxes on which it is based. These are drawn from contradictions in human relations and within man himself, from the opposed yet interdependent dualities of body and spirit, pleasure and pain, virtue and vice. Man is self-defeating. His fate is a painful one, Marie-Claire Blais suggests, because human nature is divided within and against itself. These divisions are the source of the novel's irony, its humour, and its anguish.

The life of the body is defined by the interdependence of pleasure and pain. Marie-Claire Blais continually emphasizes the physical side of life and its coarseness, the rank smells and feelings which constitute the world of sensation. But the same sensation can be pleasant or painful, depending on how it is administered and how it is received. More perversely still, man can take pleasure in his pain. Le Septième enjoys his weekly beatings and "l'activité douce et brutale" of his brother's caresses. Héloïse has an "amour de la torture" and submits willingly to the "horrible joie" offered by her rapist-lover. As always, Jean-Le Maigre sums up the condition in his poetry where he celebrates the "DOUX SUPPLICE DES SENS." Because of this contradiction inherent in man, whenever characters try to escape the pain threatening from without, they then draw it into their fantasies and, in their happiest dreams, are giving or receiving pain:

[13]Robert Buckeye, "Nouveau Roman Made Easy," *Canadian Literature,* No. 31 (Winter 1967), p. 68.

[14]Roger Duhamel, "Un univers livré à la cruauté," *Présence de la Critique,* ed. Gilles Marcotte (Ottawa: HMH Ltée, 1966), p. 60.

> Théo Crapula parlait d'un rêve qu'il avait fait pendant la nuit.
>
> —Vous me fouettiez, oui, vous me fouettiez jusqu'au délire et j'étais heureux, je vous demandais de me fouetter plus encore.(126)

Dreams incorporate and amplify the harsh conditions of reality. The same fusion or confusion is responsible for the blending of sensuality and spirituality in Héloïse's fantasies. Through sensuality, man indulges the life of the body; through spirituality, he seeks to transcend it. Unfortunately, Héloïse cannot maintain this distinction. The ascetic life of the convent, far from chastening or subduing her body, awakens it to "une sensualité fine et menaçante." This irony is later reversed in the brothel which she decorates with crucifixes and makes her spiritual refuge. Similarly, Théodule cannot separate the call of the flesh and the call to rise above the flesh: he seduces boys with the same "faibles mots d'adoration et de désespoir qu'il adressait aussi à Dieu, dans ses supplications."

Man's moral life is defined by the interdependence of virtue and vice. Their paradoxical relation is suggested in a comment Marie-Claire Blais has made about her writing: "C'est vrai que je suis attirée par ce qu'il y a de mauvais dans les êtres, mais les plus beaux sentiments peuvent être fatals."[15] Good intentions can produce fatal results; bad deeds may prove unexpectedly beneficial. In a perverse world where virtue and vice are plants with stems intertwined, people cannot distinguish between good and evil impulses. Théodule prays to God for "ce pardon comme une nourriture contenant la précieuse énergie pour accomplir le mal." Jean-Le Maigre, who plans to write a "vie de saint devenu pécheur," feels that the damned have more fun, and sadly but proudly tells us that his attempt to lead a good life is doomed. His only hope is to stumble accidently on goodness, to become good without even knowing it: at the Noviciat, "Je deviendrai dévot sans même le savoir." He enjoys Confession, not because it offers absolution, but because it permits him to parade his vices, "les plus beaux péchés de la terre."

On a higher level, man's spiritual life is made ambiguous by the uncertainty of his relation to God. The novel is full of calls for conversion, absolution, pardon, mercy, and finally, grace:

> Il voulait devenir meilleur, se sanctifier, recouvrer pour un moment, l'état de grâce, hélas, chez lui, éphémère comme la rose et se ternissant au moindre contact. (124)

This is a call for deliverance, for a spiritual escape which man cannot make by himself, but which might be offered to him by a loving God. It is a final attempt to take flight, to transcend human complexity and paradox and evil. It is a plea for the refuge of salvation. But man despairs of divine grace even as he calls for it. He prays continually, but without hope. Grace is ephemeral, and man does not know how to request or accept it. Théodule prays, not only for pardon for his faults, but for "cette paisible sécurité dont les vices on besoin pour s'épanouir." Héloïse enjoys her martyrdom and repeats it nightly. Le Septième claims to feel true remorse even as he admits that his crimes are pleasurable. He hopes to live honestly on his thieving, and explains his technique to his brother:

[15]Quoted by Gérard-Marie Boivin, "Le Monde Etrange de Marie-Claire Blais," p. 14.

> —A ta place, dit le Septième, je lui demanderais pardon. Oui, avant de voler la viande. (20)

"Emmanuel" means "God is with us." The existence and even presence of God are not in question, but this, far from being comforting, is a source of the greatest pain. Without God, there could be no hell. Through Him, the pain, punishment and judgment feared by all the characters become transcendent and eternal. And the source of greatest despair, as Dante is told by Virgil in the *Inferno,* is to know that God exists but to be cut off from Him. Characters continually try to define their relation to God and His attitude to them. At times, God seems inaccessible: "J'appelais tous les Saints du ciel à notre secours, mais personne ne venait." At other times He seems cruel or benevolent or indifferent. But the worst time is when He seems to be all these at once, that is, when He seems the most ambiguous aspect of an already contradictory universe. At the funeral of brother Pivoine, one striking phrase sets forth this possibility:

> Pivoine (Joseph-Aimé) dormait paisiblement et ne se souvenait plus de nous.
> —Un ange de plus dans le ciel, dit Monsieur le Curé. Dieu vous aime pour vous punir comme ça! (50)

Divine love merges with divine punishment; the gift of life is indistinguishable from the gift of death.

Death negates all the contradictions in the novel, yet it too proves to be a paradox. It is the ultimate escape, but also the ultimate imprisonment. It is both sanctuary and tomb, victory and defeat. The birds of freedom and soaring imagination and also the black birds of ill-omen:

> Combien funèbre la neige
> Sous le vol des oiseaux noirs. . . (24)

As a peaceful retreat and an escape from life, death is welcome. Jean-Le Maigre is exuberantly morbid. He loves his disease like a sister and hastens along what he calls "mon douloureux pé le ri na ge vers la mort." He regards the refuge of his books as a form of death providing safety and isolation:

> je lis . . . Je ne suis pas là, dit Jean-Le Maigre. Je suis mort. (14)

But death and the painful process of dying are intimately bound up with life and the painful process of living. The pain that brings death is an important part of the world of sensation, and therefore a sign of vitality. It may even be pleasurable: "laissez-moi tousser en paix," cries the consumptive Jean-Le Maigre, "puisque cela me fait plaisir." It is in this interdependence of life and death that Grand-Mère emerges as a dominant figure of the novel. She tends the young and teaches them to live; but she also nurses the dying. She is custodian of life, but also "complice de la mort" and never happier than when attending funerals: "Grand-Mere Antoinette se laissait bercer par la

vague des morts, soudain comblée d'un singulier bonheur." She loves her husband only during his final agony, but finds her ideal patient in Horace, the sick old man who is forever dying but never quite dead. Presumably, he will go on dying as long as she lives to watch over his death-bed, and she is said to be immortal. Conversely, she feels that Jean-Le Maigre is in good health only after he is in his grave. At the end of the novel, she looks forward to a new season with her latest charge Emmanuel, who is clearly a replacement for Jean-Le Maigre, setting out on another pilgrimage to the grave: life repeats itself only through death and regeneration. Finally, the paradoxical union of life and death is demonstrated by Le Septième who, after his last encounter with Théodule, finds himself alone by the river:

> Le soleil se levait, sur la rivière. Il se frotta les yeux. Il n'était pas mort, comme il l'avait cru. (127)

Here is a grotesque application of the Cartesian "cogito ergo sum": Le Septième believes that he is dead; therefore he is alive.

Une Saison dans la Vie d'Emmanuel begins and ends with a reference to the spring which will succeed Emmanuel's first winter. The cycles of the seasons, of birth and death, hope and disillusionment, begin a new revolution to conclude the novel on a note of ironic renewal. It is ironic because in this world time circles endlessly without progressing, and so there can be no lasting or comforting rejuvenation. Emmanuel's name too is ironic. He is no saviour, but only, if he is like Jean-Le Maigre, a minor prophet. He cannot offer the true renewal or redemption suggested by the birth of Christ. The novel also comes full circle in its interplay of inner and outer worlds. I have argued that it traces the progressive alienation but eventual fusion of subjective and objective realms. Characters retreat into a world of dreams where they recreate in diabolical fashion the very reality they have abandoned. At the end of the novel, the conspiracy of the real and the imaginary is complete, and the dreams come true. "Je rêve que je traverse la rivière en patins," Jean-Le Maigre fantasizes in what proves to be an accurate prevision of his death. Le Septième, sharing his brother's dream, counters with "Ce n'est pas ma faute . . . je suis de l'autre côté de la rivière"; and in his last appearance, he is wounded and alone by the river with nothing before him but a life of crime. Héloïse's nightmare also comes true as she accepts her life in the "Auberge" which Jean-Le Maigre had predicted she would enter:

> Ainsi s'achevait toujours ce rêve qu'Héloïse avait fait tant de fois, dans ses nuits solitaires. Elle ne ferait plus ce rêve désormais. Il deviendrait son domaine réel, l'espace de sa vie. (88)

University of Calgary