

ECONOMIES OF SCALE:
MADELEINE FERRON'S
"LE PEULEMENT DE LA TERRE"

Sheldon P. Zitner

Elle (as in parable or nightmare she is unnamed) wakes late in a neighbour's house the morning after her wedding. She is thirteen-and-a-half. With her eighteen-year-old husband she moves to a farm near her parents, accustoms herself to marriage, weaves too many bed-covers, tends too prolific a kitchen garden, and bears twenty-two children. After her husband's death and the marriage of her youngest son, she buys a rocking-chair. But "Le mécanisme [the reference is deliberately ambiguous] ne sut pas s'ajuster à un rythme nouveau. Il se détraqua." Restless, she visits her now widely dispersed offspring, but is unable to distinguish among the generations, confusing a daughter-in-law with a grand-daughter, a grandson with her dead husband. She returns to Sept-Îles, is passed from one relative to another, and at last installed in a home for the aged where one of her sons is chaplain. Introduced to "la communauté réunie," she turns to her son and asks, "Tell me, are all these your brothers?"

Any comment on the stories of Madeleine Ferron, except (but need it be said?) that they should be better known, is likely to be longer than any one of them. All are surgically brief. The 219-pocket-size pages of *Coeur de Sucre* (Montréal: Éditions HMH, 1966) hold two dozen; "Le Peulement de la Terre," that collection's best (summarized above), occupies fewer than seven full pages — and that many thanks only to a generous format. Such brevity mocks the inevitable unwieldiness of commentary, especially since the brevity of "Le Peulement" is not — as so often in contemporary short stories — the result of synecdoche or modest aims. "Le Peulement" sets forth a central experience of a culture through the life of one of its members, who acts it out so radically as to be no longer representative. Like epic, it provides in its protagonist at once a cultural generalization and an extreme particular, but within the compass of anecdote. Criticism, however, is uncomfortable with very short works. It cannot easily speak of accumulation, repetition, and contrast, which exhibit in longer works the complexity in unity that is the common model of literary excellence. There is little chance for the critic to appeal to the concensus (where are the hierarchies of epigram or short story?), or to justify criticism by pointing to the sheer length of the fiction, which in itself seems to argue a performance to be analyzed and

reckoned with. The immediate sympathy that leads to criticism in the first place cannot be sublimated in explication and at last presented after an ergo. With short works we behave like Alice's Queen and give verdicts first and hold trials later, if at all. Critics who treat them often find themselves leaving literary questions behind and dealing with the questions of mental economy that Freud took up in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* and, therefore, with social or historical tensions whose sudden discharge is the motive and effect of wit. This essay is an attempt, less often formal than sociological, to offer some explanation of why Mlle Ferron's superb story smarts in the memory.

Perhaps the obvious interpretation of "Le Peuplement" will see it as the account of a peasant girl turned into a human brood mare. Her role played out, neither she nor her community provides another. She lapses into a restless senility emblematic of her depersonalization and wanders among children she does not recognize. Finally she is institutionalized under circumstances that promise little comfort. On such a view the story is one of pathetic victimage — a social protest with recognizable Quebec references that anti-clericals and feminists will not be alone in taking up. There is no doubt of the pathos stirred by "Le Peuplement," of Mlle Ferron's sympathies with Elle, or of her sympathies with the young husband. "Tu ne peux pas refuser, lui disait-on," that omnipresent Someone, neighbour or friend, who keeps the received modes of conduct always before us. Details of the story evoke a community prodding its members toward its traditions, and the parable-like character of the *conte* — with its avoidance of the psychological individuation and inwardness that characterize many modern short stories — intensifies the effect of lives shaped from without. The groom has gone to bed dead drunk, not — as might be the case in such modern stories — because he feared sexual inadequacy or his new responsibilities. It was simply his role to do so. "C'est toi le marié." When he wakes at eight, the good labourer ashamed to have overslept, he is formal and embarrassed as he prepares to assume his new role as "le deuxième voisin." It was in the house of a neighbour that he and Elle had spent their wedding night. The repetition of "voisin" makes a double point. The marriage is less a contract between individuals, or even a family matter, than an arrangement that expands a community. The celebration is held on community ground (the house of neighbours) and leads to the setting up of yet another such neighbour house — the second down the road — which will similarly serve in its turn. We are observing not individual fates but the multiplication of cells.

This overshadowing of individual and family life is suggested in other ways. On Elle's visits during the early days of marriage, her mother always asks how she is managing. But beyond a certain point the inquiries evidently cannot go. "Il me dit que je suis une bien gentille brebis," Elle says of her husband. The mother, intrigued, stares at her daughter but dares ask no more. She sends Elle back to her husband with a child's slice of sugared

bread and the advice that she attend to wifely chores. We are told that these visits leave the mother reassured but sad. Perhaps the exchange mirrors only the sexual reticence of a traditional community. But at both times Elle is described leaving her mother, the author emphasizes the mother's sadness as she sees Elle's long blonde braids swaying in the distance. It is an image both of the child's vulnerability and of the mother's unacted desire to protect, unacted because of a limiting code rather than unconcern.

Yet if the community is narrow and dominating, the author is at no pains to attack it, to insist upon its defects, or even to represent them. Elle and her husband leave the wedding party through the garden to avoid being made fun of in the common way of such a community. But they have no trouble in slipping away, and the incident is not emphasized. The wedding guests are ready enough to allow Elle to act her age and fall asleep — " 'A cet âge, c'est pardonnable,' avait-elle toujours entendu dire" — and when Elle reaches old age, her daughters treat her with more than obligatory kindness. When the community encircles — the story indicates — it does so to sustain. It specifies behaviour gently, but seems at times — as in the case of Elle's mother — to limit what the probable audiences for current serious fiction would think appropriate, "natural" expression. Yet it does allow the claims of nature over those of ceremony, and it is never harshly coercive. If it constrains, it does so through its narrowness, which provides little opportunity for the conception of alternatives to itself, thus promoting its members to interiorize its injunctions.

One could at this point perhaps argue that the story's strategy of protest is precisely such an avoidance of direct criticism in favour of a more telling blandness. But this is hardly the case. Even if one leaves out of account the other stories in *Coeur de Sucre*, one sees clear evidence that the author writes from within the spirit of the communities she treats. Mlle Ferron seems at times to allow the community to absorb the author's point of view. When Elle overhears her neighbours pardoning her in advance were she to fall asleep, the next sentence reads: "Evidemment, mais pas le soir de ses nocces!" To whom shall we assign the thought: to Elle, to the author, or to other neighbours, willing to pardon but knowing what is expected? The clearest evidence of the author's position, however, precludes the interpretation of the story as protest. When Elle decides to visit her progeny, we are told that "Elle avait des enfants établis aux quatre coins de la Province, quelques-uns même exilés aux États-Unis." The capitalization is conventional, the use of "four corners" with its unexpected completion by "la Province" rather than "the earth" possibly significant, but the adjective "exilés" is the author's self-commitment. Finally, however, it is Mlle Ferron's treatment of Elle that must decide the issue. Whatever the evidence for the community as the determiner of Elle's fate, evidence to the contrary seems weightier and fully intended.

About midway in "Le Peuplement" there is a change in emphasis. At the

outset of the story Elle wakes confused and astonished at her marriage. Her childish vulnerability, her wondering encounter with sexuality, her uneasy dependence on her mother — these are the “realistic” substance of the first half. But with a change of seasons comes a change in her behaviour, in the way we are asked to perceive her, and a change in the narrative mode from actuality to marvel. Elle’s visits home become less frequent, then confined to Sundays. This alteration goes beyond a mere accustoming to marriage. “Elle avait trouvé son rythme personnel” — the sentence introduces us to the nature of the change. But lest we interpret this as a settling into the “natural” roles of wife and mother prescribed by custom, the author emphasizes the inutility, the unnaturalness, and the particularly willed and personal character of Elle’s developing married life. She begins a round of super- (or is it sub-?) human activity. The bedcovers she weaves overflow her storage chest. The vegetables and calves she raises are too many for the table or the market. If this is outside the practicalities of peasant life, it is also unnatural. Babies arrive “sans respecter le délai fixé par la nature.” “Avec elle, les saisons semblaient toujours en retard.” And if the orders of prudence and nature seem violated, so also are the generational and familial orders of society. The spectacle of a beribboned infant carried wailing through the front door just as (“heureusement!”) his half-grown sibling hitches on a knapsack and ventures out through the rear is perhaps amusing. But that “the begetting of her children . . . left the human order broken, . . . giving her grandsons uncles, younger than themselves, for whom they could not have the slightest respect” — this is unsettling. Mlle Ferron can be epigrammatically witty about her odd creation. It is, however, a peculiarly Bergsonian wit, precipitated by the mechanization of the human and ending in the recognition of the sinister implications of such reductiveness.

The idea of a mechanism and its unvarying, rapid rhythm is played off against the idea of nature and its slower, more forgiving, biological rhythms. Elle raises her children “well,” but “mécaniquement, sans les compter.” One notes the author’s solicitude, but is the reader intended simply to accept the paradox without question? Elle’s life during this period is three times spoken of as “le mécanisme” — as simple, as too rapid, as impossible to adjust to the new rhythm of the rocking chair when childbearing is at an end. The repeated use of the word “mécanisme” suggests that the author is italicizing the unnaturalness of Elle’s progress. How ironic then is the description of Elle’s attitude toward that mechanism. She accepts the plethora from her loins “comme on accepte les saisons, les regardant partir, non pas avec fatalisme ou résignation mais sereine et consentante devant l’inéluctable destin qui fait que la pomme tombe quand elle est mûre.” The unalienated oneness with the diurnal round that was an ideal of Romanticism is here horribly recalled in Elle’s subjection to a mechanism that almost literally makes of the mother an unthinking tree, of the child a falling fruit. The

inferences to be drawn from this horrid entangling of mechanism with nature perhaps provide the reader with the rueful comfort of recognizing that a certain "alienation" lies at the foundation of all human culture. But one must inquire how this mechanism, this monstrous artifice, came about. Elle is not presented only as its victim. Here the interpretation of "Le Peuplement" as protest fails decisively. It is Elle herself who finds out the preternatural rhythm of this "mécanisme très simple qu'elle avait, une fois pour toutes, mis en mouvement. . . ." True enough, Elle is trapped in her invention: "Elle était l'engrenage principal, sans droit de regard sur l'ensemble." But she is in the first instance the author of her condition, the chooser.

One can perhaps argue that before child-bearing and after it, Elle is the victim of circumstance. But after the beginning of the story she is presented as acting rather than merely undergoing. Mlle Ferron emphasizes this with question and comment. Of Elle's fierce activity she asks: "Avait-elle eu trop d'énergie ou un surcroît d'ambition? Peut-être avait-elle seulement manqué de vigilance." Later she says of the mechanism: "C'était parfait. Sa seule erreur, ce fut d'avoir, au mécanisme, donné un tempo trop rapide." When Elle's husband is dead and her youngest son married, again Elle takes the management of her life into her own hands; she does not subside into the prescribed retirement, although "elle s'arrêta pour souffler, décidée à s'acheter enfin des pantoufles et une berçante." The mechanism does not adjust, however; "Il se détraqua." Her question to her neighbour, "Et si je visitais ma famille?," is more assertion of intent than request for advice. The mechanism has, it is clear, a law of its own, but the language of the passages cited above demonstrates that we are intended to see Elle as its initiator, its first cause. The description of Elle's monstrous fecundity as "extravagant" is repeated twice, and Elle's unawareness of that extravagance is insisted upon. For all that, the mechanism and the twenty-two children are what she has willed. The questions which suggest biological ("énergie") and moral ("surcroît d'ambition") causes and the idea of human limitation in "lack of vigilance" and "sa seule erreur" curiously recall (I intend no extravagant comparison here) both the variety of "causes" in the case of Oedipus and Sophocles' final coming down on the side of *hamartia*, a mistake in which the question of blame hardly enters. As in the classical tragedy, the mechanism is set off, but the circumstances of its starting are raised only to emphasize how they resist reduction to a "cause."

Social critic or inventor of grotesques? The question has been asked of Gogol and of Dickens, and it should be asked here of Mlle Ferron. One can perhaps deny the polarity by observing that social criticism begins in comparing actuality with some ideal from which it departs in ways both painful and ludicrous; when the latter dominates, we have grotesque. Yet the grotesque is, after all, recognizable actuality seen at its extreme. The connection suggests that in "Le Peuplement" the limitations of society are perhaps used for the sake of providing a needed locale for the story's

grotesque invention, rather than that the grotesque serves as a critique of a narrow, rural community. Vivid as is the first part of "Le Peuplement", it is Elle as self-created mechanical mother, Elle disoriented among her progeny, and Elle's startling, senile question at the end that prompt our responses. These responses depend on the mode of the second half of the story which, despite the continuity of Mlle Ferron's parsimonious style, is anything but realistic. This mode emerges from hints given in the first half, from the matter-of-fact stating of Elle's age at marriage, the age of Shakespeare's Juliet or of the subject of Carew's "Second Rapture." But the first part of "Le Peuplement" evokes something recognizably like rural life. The second half, however, is a departure from time and place. Some actualities help to define this departure.

Statistics on the age of Canadian brides at marriage typically present the youngest age-category as 15 or below. Statistics on the number of live births to Canadian mothers typically present the most fertile group as having 20 or more children. Mlle Ferron has located Elle's age at marriage and the number of her offspring at the edge of possibility, just where instances are so few that statisticians think it useful to "lump the cells." Statistics for the decade of publication of *Coeur de sucre* (I use the compilations in the *Canada Year Book*) indicate that, despite popular opinion, since 1959 and especially since 1964 "gross reproduction rates" have dropped sharply in Quebec and that, while the fertility rate of mothers in the 15-19 age group did increase after 1936, a downtrend appeared in 1961. In 1963 and 1964 (the earliest years for which the age of Canadian brides is given in a "lumped" 12-14 rather than in an under-15 category), the number of brides between 12 and 14 in all of Canada was 92 (0.1%) and 90. In the years 1958 to 1964, the number of children in the order of 20-or-over category is listed as 53, 46, 47, 72, 44, 50, and 28 — 1961 being, apparently, an atypical year. The case of Elle is at the very edge of these realities. If one considers the figures for 1963 that place the number of illegitimate births in Canada to mothers under 15 at between four and five times the number of legitimate births, Elle's situation seems even more unusual. The absence in the story of multiple births, miscarriages, or deaths in infancy (especially given the relatively high rate of infant mortality in Quebec during the '60's) again suggests how close to the edge of the actual the story goes.

Quebec statistics in the *Rapport Annuel* (1968) of the *Québec Ministère des Affaires Sociales* (Table 26, p. 68) present similar evidence. Even if the "age unknown" category has tactfully absorbed the information on brides under 15, there were apparently no brides of Elle's age in the province between 1953 and 1962 and only two for the period 1963-1968. The table presenting figures for the order of live births in Quebec during 1968 by the age of the mother (p. 48) indicates that 5 women had 21 children, 2 had 22, 2 had 23, and only 1 had 24, the highest number. There is some point in plodding further through curious numbers. The *Guinness Book of Records*

lists 69 as the greatest number of children produced by a single mother — not a Canadian instance. But when truth is this much stranger than even fiction, it has the tenor of neither; it is “unthinkable” and should perhaps prompt the conclusion that the grotesque in fiction, though it lies near the limits of what is possible, does not break far through the limits of what one ordinarily believes to be possible. Truth seems stranger than fiction, stranger even than the grotesque. The grotesque is not “pure” fantasy; it seems rather to be a mode that makes its peculiar impression because it is still close enough to the everyday not to be rejected out of hand and placed on “another level.”

But the grotesque vision of “Le Peuplement” is more than a matter of numbers. This vision is clarified and culminates in Elle’s question to her chaplain son as she looks round at the assembled inmates (ironically called the “communauté réunie”) of the home for the aged: “Are all these your brothers?” A meaningful question, perhaps the most important question the citizen, the moralist, the social scientist, the reader, can ask. But by the end of “Le Peuplement” the question is not only important; it has become, because of its context, shockingly absurd. And here, I think, is set off the particular shudder of pathos the story provides. Humanity refines and alters its animal antecedents through the taboos and hindrances that are elaborated into familial roles and articulated into the customary attitudes of the generations. Our prehistory is a struggle to create a syntax of human relationships, and our maturing as individuals a struggle to maintain it, to act — in Cordelia’s words — “according to our bond” as parent, child, kinsman, friend, fellow-man, “no more nor less.” The failure of this syntax is chaos and meaninglessness for the person and the community. Indeed, a metaphoric idealized concept of human brotherhood cannot even come into being without the articulation of roles beyond the biological alliances of the litter and the herd. What “Le Peuplement” presents through Elle’s eyes and her fate is the breakdown of the human syntax: a blurring of roles and generations, a devolution of species whose meaning is strikingly crystallized in the absurdity of Elle’s final question. Our sympathy for what Elle has become, for her own depersonalization and confusion, is mixed with our affective grasp of the “point” of the story, the fearful recognition of how far mere creatureliness differs from and can endanger what our social history has made us and what we hope ourselves to be. Further, the contrast that the story makes between nature and mechanism suggests that it is not our civilization, our prescriptions of generational and familial roles, which is an artifice but our lapses from them. These are striking implications in the current context of naive primitivist and sophisticated “modernist” attacks on social arrangements as alienating causes of “discontent.”¹

¹For a useful discussion of some of these, see Daniel Bell, “Beyond Modernism, Beyond Self,” in *Art, Politics and Will: Essays in Honor of Lionel Trilling*, ed. Anderson et al. (New York, 1977), pp. 213 ff.

The title of the story must have given more than a little trouble to Sheila Watson, who has made a magisterial translation of it for Philip Stratford's excellent anthology, *Stories from Quebec* (1974). English has no easily useable word that elegantly unites "peopling" as of a province with "stocking" as of a fishpond. The precise irony of Mlle Ferron's title is therefore not to be reproduced easily. The word "peuplement" is common in French demographic studies, as for example in Guy Pourcher's *Le Peuplement de Paris* (1966). But it is given its special ironic force in "Le Peuplement" because of the content of the story. Mrs. Watson's solution to this difficulty of translation provides us with the English title "Be Fruitful and Multiply," which has its own sardonic, if narrower, biblical reference, and serves to remind us that the story, for all its departure from the formulas of social protest, does have some narrow social implications. But these apply beyond the borders of a province or indeed a single culture. Quantity, which in the liberal politics of the nineteenth century was a measure of quality, has now become its enemy. Mlle Ferron has managed to make immediate, domestic, and pastoral — and therefore sinister and moving — the uncivilizing giantisms that have too often become dull clichés in larger modern fictions.

Trinity College
University of Toronto