LA SCOUINE: *INFLUENCES AND SIGNIFICANCE*

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Critics have been unanimous both in identifying the importance of naturalism in Albert Laberge's *La Scouine* (1918) and in linking his work with the fiction of Emile Zola and Guy de Maupassant.[1] Laberge's skill with the short story structure, his economical delineation of character, his use of comic or tragicomic irony and his focussing upon quite ordinary incidents, all suggest affinities with Maupassant's writing whose effect on him Laberge describes so vividly in *Peintres et écrivains d'hier et d'aujourd'hui:* "La lecture des *Contes du jour et de la nuit* m'avait révélé le génie de cet écrivain, la littérature française, et m'avait fait éprouver l'une des plus fortes impressions que j'aie ressenties en ma vie."[2]

Jacques Brunet is explicit about the elements of naturalism found in Laberge's work:

> Naturalisme, en effet, que sa volonté d'impartialité et d'objectivité qui le pousse à supprimer les réflexions personnelles et à fonder ses récits sur des faits réels . . . Naturalisme aussi que cette façon de voir la vie en noir, les catastrophes qui pleuvent sur ses héros, le parti pris de malheur qui est la base même de son univers. Naturalisme enfin que son attrait pour le sordide, les sensations fortes et les scènes d'un goût douteux.[3]

La Scouine has been most often compared to Zola's *La Terre* because each work is concerned with a dark depiction of rural life.

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[1]See Gérard Bessette, *Anthologie d'Albert Laberge,* 1ère édition (Montréal: Le Cercle du Livre de France, 1962), p. vii; Jacques Brunet, *Albert Laberge: sa vie et son oeuvre* (Ottawa: Editions de l'Université d'Ottawa, 1969), p. 33; Gérard Tougas, "Panorama du roman canadien-français," *Le Roman canadien-français,* ed. Paul Wyczynski et al., Archives des Lettres Canadiennes, Tome III (Montréal: Fides, 1964), p. 18.

[2]Albert Laberge, *Peintres et écrivains d'hier et d'aujourd'hui* (Montréal: Edition privée, 1938), p. 150.

[3]Jacques Brunet, "La Scouine d'Albert Laberge," *L'Ecole littéraire de Montréal,* 2e édition, ed. Paul Wyczynski et al., Archives des Lettres Canadiennes, Tome II (Montréal: Fides, 1972), p. 205.

Unlike Zola, however, Laberge does not create large and cohesive patterns of action, be they generational, seasonal or historical. *La Scouine* lacks the sustained cyclical and epic qualities of Zola's *La Terre* or *Germinal.* These contrasts originate, in part, in the differences between the short story and novel structures. Other differences are also important. Sensuality is absent from *La Scouine.* There is no human violence comparable in scale to the sadistic murder of old Fouan in *La Terre* or to the hideous mutilation of the grocer in *Germinal.* Also, Laberge is far more pessimistic than Zola, who tends to show, even in the midst of despair, a very tenuous hope of resolution. Harry Levin goes so far as to say of Zola that his "pessimism is a trait acquired through confrontation with harsh realities, whereas his optimism seems innate."[4] Laberge's real model was Guy de Maupassant whose "search for distasteful truth"[5] foreshadowed the fatalistic tone of *La Scouine* and Laberge's use of rural settings and of particular themes — avarice, revenge, the often antagonistic relationship between parents and children — which echo the French naturalists.

La Scouine's structure is, to a great extent, the product of its protracted composition. The book was written over a long period of some fifteen to seventeen years. Jacques Brunet reports that "de 1899 à 1916, il [Laberge] travaille à *La Scouine* dont il publie irrégulièrement des extraits dans les journaux."[6] The extended period of composition appears to have complemented Laberge's short story *métier,* for *La Scouine* really consists of a series of essentially unrelated episodes which do, however, create and sustain a mood and tone of deprivation, which are nicely matched by the author's terse language. The short story structure permits and emphasizes concentration on detail rather than on large patterns. The details in *La Scouine* are prosaic, characteristic of the naturalists' obsessive interest in the *minutiae* of ordinary life, "où il 'n'arrive rien', et où il n'arrivera jamais rien, parce que cette triste existence est semblable à tant d'autres qui représentent le pâle écoulement des jours moroses, sans but et sans intérêt."[7] In fact, it is substantially the darkness of

[4]Harry Levin, *The Gates of Horn* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 361.
[5]Paul Ignotus, *The Paradox of Maupassant* (London: University of London Press, 1966), p. 126.
[6]Brunet, "La Scouine d'Albert Laberge," p. 204.
[7]Jean Charbonneau, *L'Ecole littéraire de Montréal* (Montréal: Editions Albert Lévesque, 1935), p. 229.

tone and point of view which is responsible for fostering whatever sustained unity there is between the different episodes of *La Scouine.*

If the form and tone of Laberge's work complement the short stories of Maupassant, the reader encounters some of the most striking parallels between the two authors in Maupassant's numerous stories about Norman peasants. These rustic *tableaux* have often been discussed in terms of their crude harshness. In them the writer frequently develops the themes of avarice, brutality and primitivism through a representative study of character and a skillful ear for the dialect or *patois* of the region. These tales furnish "la peinture des moeurs rustiques de la Normandie. Maupassant s'est plu, et ce sont celles de ses nouvelles que l'on aime le mieux, à montrer inlassablement le paysan et sa province natale, ses malices, sa finasserie, ses gros instincts, dont les manifestations sont quelquefois terribles, mais, plus souvent, bien amusantes."[8] One detects a strong similarity between Maupassant's Norman peasants and Laberge's French-Canadian farmers, very probably of Norman descent. Both groups are characterized by a laconic *patois* and both share a common, avaricious and suspicious nature so aptly crystallized in Ringuet's description of the priest in *Trente arpents:*

> En lui aussi le sang normand coulait âpre et méfiant et fort: Il avait le même geste esquissé que ses ouailles, la même brièveté de parole, les mêmes réticences et par cela même, une pareille divination des choses sous-entendues.[9]

In *La Scouine,* Laberge displays little of Maupassant's comic sense. Nevertheless, the French-Canadian writer makes effective use of a literary device germane to many of the comic and tragic stories in *Contes du jour et de la nuit* — the grotesque. "Le Vieux" deals with an old man whose prolonged death agony tortures his greedy daughter and son-in-law. "L'Ivrogne" tells the story of a drunken fisherman who unwittingly murders his wife with a chair. "Coco" is about a young, brutal peasant boy who is enraged at having to care for an old, worn-out horse, and who subsequently tortures it and then tethers it in such a way that it dies of hunger. Other stories in Maupassant on peasant themes consistently exploit the grotesque.

Laberge does not possess the same command of language and

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[8]Pierre Martino, *Le Naturalisme français (1870-1895),* 6e édition, revisée et complétée par R. Ricatte (Paris Librarie Armand Colin, 1960), p. 131.
[9]Philippe Panneton [Ringuet], *Trente arpents* (1938; Montréal: Fides, 1964), p. 43.

form as Maupassant, nor does he work on a large canvas like Zola. However, in his characters, who play "un rôle journellement semblable et ne présentent d'intérêt que par son côté grotesque, monotone et déprimant,"[10] Laberge links himself with these writers through the deliberate perversion, distortion and debasement of commonly idealized human values. This technique expresses the grotesque not in the fantastic or fanciful, but in the quirks of the morbid and subnormal.

The use of the grotesque, so important to later French-Canadian fiction, brought down on Laberge the shocked opprobrium of the church when several chapters of *La Scouine* were published in the reviews *Le Terroire* and *La Semaine* in 1909.[11] Laberge's presentation differed completely from the idyllic depictions of rural life found in popular fiction like Antoine Gérin-Lajoie's *Jean Rivard* (1862) and Philippe Aubert de Gaspé's *Les Anciens Canadiens* (1863). These writers had idealized life in the country in ways which connected de Gaspé's nostalgia with the conservative, religious nationalism of Gérin-Lajoie. Both were preoccupied with the survival and development of French Canada and they gave voice to these concerns in works which brought them great popularity. In contrast to their descriptions of scenes and characters, the iconoclastic perspective and technique of Laberge stand out in stark relief. Two examples substantiate this difference. The Deschamps' kitchen in *La Scouine,* burdened with silence and dinginess, is no longer the emblem of vital community as it was in *Les Anciens Canadiens:*

> Tout était mouvement et confusion dans la cuisine où ils entrèrent d'abord: les voix rieuses et glapissantes des femmes se mêlaient à celles des six hommes de relai occupés à boire, à fumer et à les agacer. Trois servantes, armées chacune d'une poêle à frire, faisaient, ou, suivant l'expression reçue, tournaient des crêpes au feu d'une immense cheminée, dont les flammes brillantes enluminaient à la Rembrandt ces visages joyeux, dans toute l'étendue de cette vaste cuisine.[12]

Moreover, Laberge's characters are diminished and brutalized by their labours, unlike the hero in *Jean Rivard,* who, through work and integrity, comes to symbolize the utopian continuity of rural

[10]Charbonneau. *L'Ecole littéraire de Montréal,* p. 226.
[11]Brunet, *Albert Laberge: sa vie et son oeuvre,* p. 22-23.
[12]Philippe Aubert de Gaspé, *Les Anciens Canadiens* (1863; Montréal: Fides, 1972), p. 108-109.

French-Canadian Catholicism — conservative, hard-working and pious:

> Mais ne croyons pas aux apparences, jamais Jean Rivard n'a été plus heureux; son corps est harassé, mais son âme jouit, son esprit se complait dans ces fatigues corporelles. Il est fier de lui-même. Il sent qu'il obéit à la voix de Celui qui a décrété que l'homme "gagnera son pain à la sueur de son front." Une voix intérieure lui dit aussi qu'il remplit un devoir sacré envers son pays, envers sa famille, envers lui-même; que lui faut-il de plus pour ranimer son énergie?[13]

Idealization, nostalgia and utopianism were for de Gaspé and Gérin-Lajoie rooted in an honouring and elevating of the past. Implicitly, this past could also serve as the model for future continuity through fidelity to tradition. The literary structure creating and issuing from such a perspective was, of course, romance, the pattern involving the elevated drama of representative characterization, conflict, affirmative resolution.

Maria Chapdelaine (1914), through its use of some of the patterns and techniques associated with romance, can be grouped with *Jean Rivard* and *Les Anciens Canadiens,* although Hémon's novel appeared some fifty years later. Through the depiction of an ever-renewing seasonal, generational and symbolic cycle, Hémon was able to enclose and mitigate the disorientations of personal tragedy and threatening temporal change. In the novel's beautiful simplicity of language and structure, Maria becomes the Holy Mother of Quebec, the symbolic vessel of salvation to whom the annunciatory voices speak:

> Autour de nous des étrangers sont venus, qu'il nous plaît d'appeler des barbares; ils ont pris presque tout le pouvoir; ils ont acquis presque tout l'argent; mais au pays de Québec, rien n'a changé.[14]

De Gaspé, Gérin-Lajoie and Hémon were all writing from a particular perspective. De Gaspé was caught up in personal remembrance, in history and in the exemplary fiction of memory and the past — the novels of Sir Walter Scott. Gérin-Lajoie served as spokesman for the utopian ideology of French-Canadian Catholicism. Hémon saw the meaning of pioneer life in the virgin lands of the New World through the romantic vision of the European outsider.

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[13]Antoine Gérin-Lajoie, *Jean Rivard, le défricheur* (1862; Montréal: J. B. Rolland et fils, 1874), p. 88-89.

[14]Louis Hémon, *Maria Chapdelaine* (1914; Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1954); p. 241.

One cannot be sure that, before the completion of *La Scouine* in 1916, Laberge was familiar with *Maria Chapdelaine,* first published in the Parisian review *Le Temps* in 1914. In any event, the writing of *La Scouine* was well in hand before Hémon's arrival in Canada in 1911. It is most tempting for the reader of today to contrast Laberge and Hémon when, in fact, it was against the kind of idealization found in *Les Anciens Canadiens* and *Jean Rivard* that Laberge was writing.

It has been argued that *La Scouine* was the first work of fictional realism to have appeared in French Canada. *Les Anciens Canadiens* and particularly *Maria Chapdelaine,* for all the romance elements in them, are also famous for detailed scenes or *tableaux* of verifiable authenticity. Rather, it is the innovative, grotesque technique of *La Scouine* which is remarkable and which can be examined in terms of intention and point of view as they are revealed in the book's initial paragraphs. A comparative approach is helpful to this discussion through brief reference to the other works that have already been mentioned. Aubert de Gaspé opens his novel in a discursive, colloquial manner by drawing attention, through the use of an intimate, informal voice, to the narrator. *Jean Rivard* first addresses the reader directly in a manner which, for all its good humour, is basically homiletic. *Maria Chapdelaine* begins ritually with the final words of the mass, followed by the social ceremonies of exchanging news and then of hearing parish business from the mouth of Napoléon Laliberté, who acts as village crier. Each work thus establishes a context in its first paragraphs. De Gaspé's is nostalgic, Gérin-Lajoie's is preceptive, Hémon's is sacramental and communal.

La Scouine's initial and sustained context is oppressive. The symbolism of the cross traced rapidly on the loaf of bread by Urgèle Deschamps represents an unthinking formality rather than a pious ritual. The knife blesses and cuts equally. The monotonous sequence of undifferentiated actions at the table terminates in "ce silence triste et froid qui suit les journées de dur labeur."[15] The initial context is not nostalgic, preceptive or sacramental. The story does not begin with the narrator, or reader, or setting, but with action — the knife marking and cutting the bread — and with the "goût sur et amer" (p. 1) of a sad and silent world.

[15]Albert Laberge, *La Scouine* (1918; Montréal: Les Editions de l'Actuelle, 1972), p. 1. [Subsequent page references will refer to this edition and will appear in parentheses, immediately following the quotation.]

The setting of Laberge's book is appropriately lugubrious, isolated and brutalizing. For Gérard Bessette, the book is "le roman de la terre *absolu,* dont l'horizon ne dépasse pas les bornes de la paroisse (ou de la municipalité) et qui paraît imperméable à toute influence extérieure."[16] He adds that "cette 'monopolarité' de *La Scouine,* cette absence de 'l'ailleurs', sur le plan idéologique aussi bien qu'imaginaire, contribuent puissamment à l'unité du roman. Elles donnent au lecteur une impression de fatalité, de 'fermeture' quasi claustrophobique" (p. xii-xiii). The characters have been victimized primarily by their cruel environment. La Scouine and her brother Charlot, returning from the fair, come upon a farmer scything and singing

> La Complainte de la Faulx, une chanson qui disait le rude travail de tous les jours, les continuelles privations, les soucis pour conserver la terre ingrate, l'avenir incertain, la vieillesse lamentable, une vie de bête de somme (p. 79).

The description of the land is coloured by recurring pathological images, which suggest disease and death: "Pendant longtemps, le pays avait été empesté d'une odeur de charogne . . . C'était à croire que la région était devenue un immense charnier, un amoncellement de pourriture et de corruption" (p. 35). After the fall burning, "la terre paraissait comme rongé par un cancer, la lèpre, ou quelque maladie honteuse et implacable" (p. 80). Jérémie Deschamps returns to his native region after an absence of sixty years and, within thirteen days of his return, hangs himself in the barn. Laberge seems to suggest that the grotesque distortions of life and environment are deadly parts of a brutalizing and destructive interdependence. Dissociated from a normal productive cycle, the land becomes a place where neither crops nor men flourish, but are stunted, abused and misshapen.

The distorting and oppressive effect of *La Scouine* depends a great deal upon the description of repulsive physical characteristics. The first chapter introduces three characters who embody increasing degrees of ugliness. Urgèle Deschamps, in eating his meal, is described almost as an animal at the trough, dirtying his food, swallowing "d'un coup de langue" and drinking "à longs traits, en faisant entendre, de la gorge, un sonore glouglou" (p. 1). His wife is deformed by her advanced pregnancy and she is also compared to

[16]Gérard Bessette, *Anthologie d'Albert Laberge,* p. xi.

an animal because of "son goître semblable à un battant de cloche qui lui retombait ballant sur la poitrine" (p. 1). Finally, it is the castrator Baptiste Bagon, most alienated from life, who is most physically hideous:

> L'homme de peine, très petit, était d'une laideur grandiose. Une tête énorme de mégacéphale surmontait un tronc très court, paraissait devoir l'écraser de son poids. Ce chef presque complètement dépourvu de cheveux, ressemblait à un aride butte de sable sur laquelle ne poussent que quelques brins d'herbe. La picotte avait outrageusement labouré ses traits et son teint était celui d'un homme souffrant de la jaunisse. Ajoutons qu'il était borgne. Sa bouche édentée ne laissait voir, lorsqu'il l'ouvrait, que quelques chicots gâtés et noirs comme des souches (p. 2).

Debasing physical description also renders others repulsive. Paulima receives the nickname "Scouine" because it is the strange children's word her classmates give her to signify the fact that she reeks of urine. The priest's face at one point is red from the cold and is described as "un morceau de viande saignante" (p. 47). Other details have the same repugnant effect. As La Scouine prays, her "pieds moites, jamais lavés, à l'odeur infecte, séchaient" (p. 108). Jérémie Deschamps, from time to time, "s'arrêtait pour tousser, et lançait sur le poêle un gros chachat gras et visqueux. On entendait alors un court grésillement, et il se répandait dans la pièce une odeur nauséabonde" (p. 116). Together, the characters are a "ramassis de brutes, de chiffes, de crétins ou d'ignorants."[17]

Parts of the novel describe events which articulate a cynical comedy of victimization. Gross revenge is taken on La Scouine by the schoolboys for her having reported their after-school activities. An old man, begging on his knees in the mud for a miracle from the bishop, only succeeds in being thoroughly splashed by mud as the ecclesiastical carriage passes by. La Scouine cruelly cheats a blind beggar of some of his money. All of these events are characteristic of a community radically estranged from humanizing conventions and values.

There are two episodes where the grotesque is most powerfully developed, and each episode is concerned with unnatural victimization. Chapter twelve is about the deaths of animals, first by disease, then by anger, and finally by superstition. This chapter

[17]Ibid., p. xvii.

furnishes chilling insights into human psychological pathology. The setting is initially described as a place of death where the crops have failed and where "le charbon avait effroyablement déclimé les troupeaux" (p. 35). The young peasant boy "le Taon," himself named after a pestilential insect, comes on a repulsive errand. A trafficker in animal bones, he exchanges pieces of tin for permission to cart away the carcasses "dans sa charette qui laissait après elle comme un sillage infect, une traînée de mortelle pestilence" (p. 35). Degraded by his environment, the boy kills his exhausted old horse by kicking it in a fit of rage, "lui démolissant les côtes de ses lourdes bottes" (p. 36). The violence and excess of this episode recall Maupassant's story "Coco" in *Contes du jour et de la nuit.* In both stories, the implicit respect of man for beast is ruthlessly violated by actions which underline and indict what seems to be fundamental human perversity.

In this chapter of *La Scouine,* however, the death of the dog is made the most vivid example of abnormal callousness through the detailed, though concise, description of the animal's struggle to survive after La Scouine has thrown it in the well to drown. Superstition has lead La Scouine to think that the dog, which belonged to le Taon, is associated with the bad luck that she believes has been visited on the farm because of "les blasphèmes du Taon" (p. 37). The juxtaposition of the well's darkness to the light of the struggling animal's eyes is an image of hopeless and unwitting entrapment. Like one of Maupassant's stories, "Pierrot," this episode explores distortion of values in terms of the relationship between man and his animals. Through this description and in the later portrayal of the senile Urgèle Deschamps, reduced in his decrepitude to a sub-human level and compared to "un animal qu'on vient de châtrer" (p. 118), Laberge seems to suggest that the fate of the animals is significant because it mirrors the grotesque fate life holds for man who is progressively brutalized and victimized by his existence.

If, according to Gérard Tougas, *La Scouine* is "destiné à dévoiler l'abrutissement des terriens,"[18] then the story of the retarded brothers Piguin and le Schno serves as both symbol and climax. The brothers' idiocy is a counterpart to the physical and spiritual exhaustion around them. They resemble the characters of Erskine

[18]Gérard Tougas, *Histoire de la littérature canadienne-française,* 2e édition (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1964), p. 135.

Caldwell's *Tobacco Road* and *God's Little Acre,* human aberrations marked by a "grotesque and malignant innocence."[19] As victims and victimizers, Piguin and le Schno represent a senseless existence of physical, mental and emotional dispossession.

The details in the chapters about the brothers are deliberately graphic. The episode opens with the brutal murder of the chicks by one brother and this is followed by bloody physical punishment. Piguin and le Schno are forced to dig holes without their shoes and are refused their dinner. Their feet become bloodied and the story's details are made progressively more morbid and repulsive. One brother becomes so hungry that he eats the putrefying flesh of dead piglets. Like a vulture, he gobbles "à belles dents cette charogne immonde, mêlée de boue" (p. 97). The other brother dies of sunstroke and as his body in its poorly made coffin is being transported to the cemetery, his feet — "à la dure écorce, aux ongles crochus" (p. 99) — are visible. La Scouine, previously insulted by the brothers, is cheered at the sight of the coffin. When the wagon arrives at the cemetery, the ground is found to be marshy. The site is described in detail which approaches the necrophilic — "l'eau s'infiltrait lentement dans le sol, pourissant les cercueils en quelques mois et faisant de la chair humaine une sorte de bouillie fangeuse et infecte" (p. 100). In contrast to Laberge's usual spare diction, this language approaches rhetoric. Here is is not the recorder, objective and olympian, but rather the advocate, shouting at those who would see and depict rural French Canada as vital, whole and self-renewing.

The degree to which Laberge's work may have influenced the French-Canadian writers who followed him is uncertain. Although extracts from *La Scouine* and his unfinished novel "Lamento," along with several short stories, were printed in different periodicals over a period of sixty years, his published books, which appeared between 1918 and 1955, were all printed privately. The smallest printing numbered 64 copies of *La Scouine* and the largest, 140 copies of *Peintres et écrivains d'hier et d'aujourd'hui* (1938). An average run numbered 75 copies.[20] Alone and beset by notoriety, Laberge wrote on in the face of vigorous denunciation and produced in *La Scouine*

[19]Robert Hazel, "Notes on Erskine Caldwell," *Southern Renascence: The Literature of the Modern South,* ed. Louis D. Rubin Jr. and Robert D. Jacobs (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1953), p. 318.

[20]*Albert Laberge: sa vie et son oeuvre,* p. 117-118.

fiction distinguished by the use of the grotesque, which marks the work of Roger Lemelin, Anne Hébert, Marie-Claire Blais and Roch Carrier. The distortions, disproportions, absurdities and farces found in representative works like Lemelin's *Au pied de la pente douce* (1944), Hébert's "Le Torrent" (1950), Blais' *La Belle bête* (1959) and Carrier's *La Guerre, yes sir!* (1968) stem in part from the same reaction that one finds in Laberge against the popular romantic depiction of French Canada. A theme inherent in their work, as in Laberge's, is dispossession. The technical vehicle of this theme is the grotesque.

Au pied de la pente douce contains elements of farce and the picaresque which are not found in *La Scouine,* but there is a striking affinity between the two books in Lemelin's use of an episodic structure and in his exploitation of the grotesque fusion of the human and non-human in his characterization. The first paragraph of the novel sets the tone for this kind of depiction:

> Le sifflet strident des policiers alerta les coeurs. Les commères et les gamins de Saint-Joseph interrompirent les unes leur lessive, les autres leurs jeux, tandis que les flâneurs, dans les restaurants, hissaient leurs faces de taupes au soleil.[21]

Several lines later, the fleeing boys are described as being "minuscules, comme des poux en fuite dans le poil d'un géant roux" (p. 9). Throughout, the emphasis falls on the fact that the parish is situated below or under and is identified by its proximity to the sewer system and by the parish church which is itself situated in a basement. To this basement the parishioners also come to be entertained by the bathos of "La Buveuse des larmes."

Lemelin belittles his characters through caricature and through exaggeration of the banal. The dark morbidity of *La Scouine* is present, but not as dominant in *Au pied de la pente douce* as it is in Laberge's book. However, in Lemelin's description of the "basse ville," one recognizes similarities with Laberge's evocation of the unrelenting deprivation of an almost sub-human world. Jean-Charles Falardeau comments:

> Non seulement cette micro-société vit *au pied* d'une société plus élevée, lointaine . . . elle semble exister sous terre. La plupart

[21]Roger Lemelin, *Au pied de la pente douce* (1944; Montréal: Le Cercle du Livre de France, 1967), p. 9. [Subsequent page references will refer to this edition and will appear in parentheses, immediately following the quotation.]

> des membres de l'un des deux clans du quartier, les Mulots (non déjà révélateur), sont des ouvriers travaillant à "l'égout collecteur" de la ville. Plusieurs familles se livrent à un petit commerce d'appoint, celui des aiches ou "vers de terre." Dès la première image du récit, ne voyons-nous pas les flâneurs, dans les restaurants, qui hissent "leurs faces de taupes au soleil"?[22]

As Falardeau notes, the use of the grotesque is germane to Lemelin's "micro-société." Women at a bingo game are referred to as "des bêtes à l'affût" (p. 71); the church choir is described as "ces bêtes à chanter" (p. 87); the soldiers of the "garde Lévis" are called "parasites" (p. 88); people in the lower town are "singes" (p. 132); Bidonnet, the sexton, has a "tête d'oiseau" (p. 212); Madame Lévesque "bourdonnait comme une grosse mouche" (p. 236); the Latruche sisters are "sales mouches" (p. 122) and "reptiles" (p. 325). Flora Boucher's knowledge of female anatomy consists of an image of "une foule d'ovaires au travail" (p. 264). In one sense, such description is caricature which emphasizes the extreme ignorance of the inhabitants of Saint-Joseph, but in an equally important way, it is suggestive of their day-to-day diminished existence. In the "Faubourg-Tuyau" (p. 82), those who gather to work at the "égout collecteur" (p. 185) are the "Mulots," the human field-mice who acquire from their work an unaccustomed prosperity. The irony which marks this kind of brutalized characterization and this kind of prosperity is distinguished to a considerable degree by the grotesque.

Much of *Au pied de la pente douce* makes effective use of physical detail to underline the individual and collective distortions of the society Lemelin is portraying. In fact, Gaston Boucher is an emblem of the world of the novel:

> Gaston arrivait le plus vite qu'il pouvait, au rhythme irrégulier de ses hanches inégales. Il possédait une figure d'homme sur un corps d'enfant, un corps qu'on aurait commencé à défaire avec une masse. Des rides barraient son front et laissaient croire qu'il était toujours à résoudre quelque problème. Sa grande bouche formait aux commissures un pli désabusé et pourtant naif qui lui donnait cet air anormal de ceux qui souffrent avant que de vivre. Rachitiques et inutiles, ses grands bras pendaient comme des lianes le long de son corps oblique
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[22]Jean-Charles Falardeau, *Notre société et son roman* (Montréal: Editions HMH, 1967), p. 186-187.

> Sa colonne vertébrale déviait d'une manière inquiétante. L'épaule droite, qui ne soutenait plus la cage thoracique, s'affaissait, emprisonnait le coeur dans un espace trop étroit (p. 18-19).

Like Laberge, Lemelin is heir to the French naturalists and their frequent fascination with the ugly, the morbid and the pathological. If, unlike Laberge, Lemelin shares with writers like Maupassant a talent for satiric, dark comedy, the context of that comedy rests in a literary tradition which Albert Laberge was the first to appropriate imaginatively to the fiction of French Canada.

The work of Hébert, Blais and Carrier makes conscious and full use of techniques of symbolism, surrealism and allusion, which are totally different from Laberge's traditional, linear style. Nevertheless, these contemporary writers share with their predecessor a sustained obsession with the theme of dispossession and with the manipulation of the grotesque as a formal embodiment of that theme. The deafness of François in "Le Torrent," the disparity between appearance and reality in *La Belle bête,* the self-mutilation of Joseph and the verbal nonsense of church ritual in *La Guerre, yes sir!* are symbols of dispossession and of resulting aberration and disproportion. All three works are militant in their challenge to the popular rural myths of French Canada, which they use the grotesque to answer. At the beginning of "Le Torrent," "cette fable terrible et belle [qui] est l'expression la plus juste qui nous ait été donnée du drame spirituel du Canada français,"[23] François identifies the ground of the grotesque:

> J'étais un enfant dépossédé du monde. Par le décret d'une volonté antérieure à la mienne, je devais renoncer à toute possession en cette vie. Je touchais au monde par fragments, ceux-là seuls qui m'étaient immédiatement indispensables, et enlevés aussitôt leur utilité terminée.[24]

Deliberate exploitation of the grotesque allows Hébert, Blais and Carrier to highlight what are to them distortions rooted in religious doctrine, life-denying moral principles, conservative aesthetic and

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[23]Gilles Marcotte, *La Presse,* January 18, 1964, quoted in Pierre Pagé, *Anne Hébert* (Montréal: Fides, 1965), p. 30.

[24]Anne Hébert, "Le Torrent" in *Le Torrent* (1950; Montréal: L'Arbre HMH, 1976), p. 23. [Subsequent page references will refer to this edition and will appear in parentheses, immediately foollowing the quotation.][25]

cultural standards. In addition, the abnormal, the bizarre and the excessive embody an implicit didacticism, a shocking depiction and indictment of spiritual oppression and fear.

"La grande Claudine" in Hébert's story has a "terrible grandeur" (p. 9), powerful jaws and thin lips "qui prononçaient, en détachant chaque syllabe, les mots de 'châtiment', 'justice de Dieu', 'damnation', 'enfer', 'discipline', 'péché originel' " (p. 10). Without dimension, a being whom François could never visualize entirely "de pied en cap" (p. 9), Claudine is the omnipresent, monstrous symbol of a repressive religious culture, whose stultifying influence, even after her death, dominates her son and drives him to suicide:

> La maison, la longue et dure maison, née du sol, se dilue aussi en moi. Je la vois se déformer dans les remous. La chambre de ma mère est renversée. Tous les objets de sa vie se répandent dans l'eau. Ils sont pauvres! Ah! je vois un miroir d'argent qu'on lui a donné! Son visage est dedans qui me contemple: "François, regarde-moi dans les yeux."
>
> Je me penche tant que je peux. Je veux voir le gouffre, le plus près possible. Je veux me perdre en mon aventure, ma seule et épouvantable richesse (p. 46).

La Belle bête concludes in a similar manner with two suicides which follow "une multiple clameur d'apocalypse."[25] The mirror in which Hébert's François sees the image of his mother becomes a self-reflecting and self-absorbing surface for Louise in Blais' novel and it is into this surface that Patrice plunges. Dispossession is central to Blais' vision and the perverse play on the traditional madonna and child motif introduces the book and signals the disruptive presence of the grotesque in it:

> Le train sortait de la ville. Tête renversée sur l'épaule de sa mère, Patrice suivait mélancoliquement le paysage taché. Tout se mêlait derrière son front comme l'envers d'une tempête au cinéma. Patrice ne comprenait pas, mais il regardait, silencieux, son visage d'idiot pourtant si éblouissant qu'il faisait croire au génie. Sa mère lui caressait la nuque de sa main ouverte. En glissant son poignet trop souple elle pouvait plonger la tête de Patrice dans son sein et mieux écouter son souffle (p. 11).

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[25]Marie-Claire Blais, *La Belle bête* (1959; Montréal: Le Cercle du Livre de France, 1968), p. 156. [Subsequent page references will refer to this edition and will appear in parentheses, immediately following the quotation.]

La Guerre, yes sir! is filled with incidents and images of violence, destruction and inversions of custom and ritual. The dismemberment with which the book opens is "un avertissement et un symbole: les êtres que nous allons voir agir dans le reste de l'oeuvre seront tous, à des degrés divers, des mutilés."[26] Joseph's act, essentially a horrifying distortion, also elicits a sense of radical moral abnormality since the act itself is treated with neither pity nor horror by the characters in the novel. Routinely used by boys as a puck, officiously retrieved by Madame Joseph and carelessly thrown to the dog as a treat, Joseph's hand becomes a token of the physical and psychological mutilation of man and society. The isolation and the Rabelaisian excesses of the wake make the collective alienation of the village overwhelming.

Hébert, Blais and Carrier write about radically estranged individuals, families and communities in an attempt, one feels, to expose and perhaps exorcise the spiritual malaise of a rigidly repressive culture. There is also a cohesion within and among these works which results from the ways in which each expresses what Jean LeMoyne evokes as the anguish of a life-denying religious dogma:

> Culpabilité maudite, voix perçue depuis la conscience première, tonnerre de malheur sur le paradis de l'enfance, venin de terreur, de méfiance, de doute et de paralysie pour la belle jeunesse, saleté sur le monde et la douce vie, éteignoir, rabat-joie, glace autour de l'amour, ennemie irréconciliable de l'être.[27]

Symbols also help foster unity. Perceval in "Le Torrent"; Adonis and Faust in *La Belle bête,* the fairy tale of *La Belle et la bêbe* in Blais; novel, superstitious folklore in *La Guerre, yes sir!* create bizarre, legendary worlds which are much closer to romance than to the naturalism of *La Scouine.* However, for all the differences which distinguish *La Scouine* from the later works, there is within it a similar oppressiveness of tone which ensures a tentative coherence of its parts. One wonders to what extent Laberge's literary models may have expressed his perceptions of his own culture. In any event, to

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[26]Ronald Bérubé, "*La guerre, yes sir!* de Roch Carrier: humour noir et langage vert," *Voix et images du pays III. Littérature québécoise,* ed. Renald Bérubé (Québec: Les Presses de l'Université du Québec, 1970), p. 150.

[27]Jean LeMoyne, *Convergences* (Montréal: Editions HMH, 1962), p. 54.

call Laberge's book an objective representation of the actual world it purports to describe is, I think, to misread it. It is true that *La Scouine* defies the rural idyll by depicting life on the land as the existence of unthinking human beasts who have been brutalized, degraded and ground down to defeat. Nevertheless, in its careful exploitation of the grotesque, the book lacks the balance of paradox and ambiguity characteristic of much realistic fiction. *La Scouine* is true to the unremitting presentation of distortion, deformity and estrangement which characterize rural life in terms that can hardly be called impartial:

> L'alternance entre l'objectivité la plus absolue et la partialité la plus passionnée est constante chez Laberge. Il avait été séduit par le pessimisme, les thèmes noirs du réalisme et du naturalisme français, qui lui offraient la possibilité de déverser sa bile. En même temps que les thèmes, il a voulu adopter la technique de cette école littéraire — mais son tempérament émotif rend souvent inutiles tous ses efforts d'objectivité.[28]

The parallels between Laberge and Lemelin are rooted in a common literary ancestry. Later French-Canadian writers share affinities with Laberge, but not in terms of any common or direct influence. Rather, they, like him, employ the grotesque to articulate themes of dispossession and alienation and, like him, they choose a rural setting, for so long the symbolic and romantic ideal of the vital wholeness of French Canada. In its day, *La Scouine* was as innovative and iconoclastic as were *Au pied de la pente douce,* "Le Torrent," *La Belle bête* and *La Guerre, yes sir!* in theirs. Together, these works have helped establish a particular literary continuity within the body of French-Canadian fiction. If Laberge was not the first to use the grotesque, he stands squarely in the vanguard. Ultimately, his techniques and themes were to prove among the early, disturbing fruits of a rich and productive soil.

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[28]Brunet, *Albert Laberge: sa vie et son oeuvre,* p. 24.