

OF RENAISSANCE AND 'SOLITUDE
IN QUÉBEC:
A RECOLLECTION OF THE SIXTIES

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"One day, Christopher and his little brothers went down to the wharf to get a closer look at the ships. 'You know,' said one of Christopher's brothers, 'if you sail too far from shore, you'll end up in the Sea of Darkness, where no stars ever shine.'"—Spencer Johnson, *The Value of Curiosity* (1977)

"... elle roule sous océan ou sous mer..."—Réjean Ducharme, *La Fille de Christophe Colomb* (1969)

"Je ne veux point m'embarquer aventureusement sur une mer théologique, pour laquelle je ne serais sans doute pas muni de boussole..."—Charles Baudelaire, "De l'Essence du rire," in *Curiosités esthétiques* (1896)

"For writers like André Brochu looking back at the sixties it was an age of beginnings and inventions," Kathy Mezei recalls in her survey of the decade.¹ According to what has become conventional accounting, it was a time of awakening, searching, discovery, and rebirth, "when a wonderful deluge of books invaded the long, empty Duplessis night."² It was a night, so this usage claims, of ecclesiastical as well as political tyranny, when the artist was forced to pass under the yoke of dogma. André Brochu, who participated in the founding of *Parti pris*, the influential review dedicated to independence, socialism, and secularism, records in the introduction to *La Littérature par elle-même* (1962) that in Québec's past "on était thomiste ou on ne l'était pas, mais si on ne l'était pas on n'était rien."³ "La lutte s'engage,"⁴ he reports in that same introduction. The lines of battle

¹Kathy Mezei, "The Literature of Québec in Revolution," in *The Human Elements*, ed. David Helwig (Ottawa: Oberon Press, 1978), p. 35.

²*Ibid.*, p. 34.

³André Brochu, Introduction to *La Littérature par elle-même*, ed. Brochu (Montréal: A.G.R.U.M., 1962), p. 6.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 5.

are drawn between the forces of darkness, of medieval dogma and tradition, and those of light, of modern creativity and freedom.

But there is a sinister foreboding in "deluge," a figure which subtly reemerges in Professor Mezei's concluding afterthought centered on 15 March 1977. Hubert Aquin, whose 1965 novel *Prochain épisode* may be described, in its own words, as a "noyade écrite,"⁵ took his own life that day. He has been likened to "a contemporary Narcissus."⁶ In her history's second afterthought, "15 November 1976," Professor Mezei invites the thought that "the developing independence of Québec culture has certain drawbacks."⁷ They are the drawbacks of increased introversion: the writer of the seventies "is more isolated, more turned in upon himself" than was "the militant writer of 1965."⁸ As with the writer, so with society: "Is the small nation of Québec becoming closed in on itself . . . ?" Professor Mezei ponders.⁹ And yet, as the two above references to Aquin—he and Réjean Ducharme are among those who figure prominently in her account of the militant sixties—suggest, the distance between the engaged writer of 1965 and the increasingly self-centered writer of the seventies is not so great as Professor Mezei's survey would seem to propose. The baroque devices for self-mirroring everywhere present in *Prochain épisode* continue to be deployed in *Neige noire* (1974), where an Aquin protagonist/antagonist again is immersed in "une fièvre intérieure."¹⁰

There is, in addition, a larger history to suggest a continuity from 1965 to 1977. Renate Usmiani moves toward an outline of that history when she writes of "the accelerated evolution of French-Canadian society as reflected in its theatre" that Québec has progressed "from the 17th to the 20th century" in the past three decades.¹¹ The fact, though, that accounts of modern Québec literature often repeat the language of Jules Michelet and Jakob Burckhardt argues for an adjustment to her time-frame for a social and literary

⁵Hubert Aquin, *Prochain épisode* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1966), p. 27. Originally published by Le Cercle du Livre de France, Montréal, in 1965.

⁶Camille R. La Bossière, *The Dark Age of Enlightenment* (Fredericton: York Press, 1980), p. 32.

⁷Mezei, p. 51.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 50.

¹⁰Hubert Aquin, *Neige noire* (Montréal: Alain Stanké, 1974), p. 142.

¹¹Renate Usmiani, "From the 17th to the 20th Century in Three Decades: The Accelerated Evolution of French-Canadian Society as Reflected in Its Theatre," *Ariel*, 10 (July 1979).

history. "The Discovery of the World," "The Development of the Individual," and "The Discovery of Man"—these now conventional elements in modernist descriptions of the post-medieval world have their origin, of course, in Michelet's *La Renaissance* (1855), where cultural awakening is said to prepare the way for political reform. By Michelet's reckoning in his *Histoire de la Révolution Française* (1847-1853), the Renaissance culminates in the Revolution, which marks the triumph of *la Justice* over *la Grâce*. Adapting Michelet's generalizations, Burckhardt, son of a Protestant clergyman, expresses the view that "during the Middle Ages, all cultural life had been sleeping as though dead."¹² Awakened to a new life, Renaissance man exalts the virtue of self-reliance: "This period . . . first gave the highest development to individuality, and then led the individual to the most zealous and thorough study of himself . . ." ¹³ Where such zealous study led necessarily varied in individual cases, but historiography provides a pattern, a logical end for man's progress in self-study. That end is expressed in the 1868 Conclusion to Walter Pater's *The Renaissance*, when he writes of "the individual in his isolation, [a] mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world."¹⁴ Such, by one account, is the reduction to a thoroughgoing subjective idealism which comes with an awakening to the complete independence of the self. Seen analogically in this historical perspective, Québec's rebirth, her awakening into the post-medieval world, and (if Professor Mezei's speculation is right) her tuming in on herself appear as synchronous or co-extensive processes. Hector de Saint-Denys Gameau, the most frequently studied of Québec's writers, anticipates that conjunction when, in 1934, he meditates on the social effects of the spirit of "individualisme," of a rebellious romantic art "aboutissant de son évolution depuis la Renaissance."¹⁵ Against this cult of the self, he sets "la grande lignée dont nous descendons, Grecs unis par Aristote à saint Thomas et la civilisation catholique."¹⁶

Of Québec's writers of the sixties, none stages with an imagination, an inventiveness, and a learning greater than Réjean Ducharme's historical drama of rebirth to solitude in the less spacious theatre of

¹²Jakob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, in *The Renaissance: Medieval or Modern?*, ed. Karl H. Dannenfeld (Boston: D. C. Heath, 1959), p. 18.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹⁴Walter Pater, *The Renaissance*, with an introduction by Arthur Symons (New York: Modern Library, n.d.), p. 196.

¹⁵Hector de Saint-Denys Gameau, *Oeuvres*, eds. Jacques Brault and Benoît Lacroix (Montréal: Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1971), p. 242.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 240.

his *patrie*. Yvan-G. Lepage writes: "L'oeuvre de Réjean Ducharme apparaît moins comme le produit d'un individu que d'un milieu, le Québec des années soixante aux prises avec les problèmes inhérents à la 'renaissance' qui a suivi 'la grande noirceur' duplessiste."¹⁷ Since Ducharme's fictions of the sixties, *L'Avalée des avalées* (1966), *Le Nez qui vogue* (1967), and *L'Océantume* (1968), are spoken by children who assault society, who fiercely and with an enormous erudition proclaim their autonomy from any code or world not of their own making, Lepage's observation, simple at face value, comprises a profound irony: it recalls a society of *révoltés* who would destroy society. In the words of *L'Avalée des avalées*, "Le seul combat logique est un combat contre tous."¹⁸ If Ducharme's fictions are less the work of an individual than of a society, they are the work of a society insisting on the absolute independence of the "I" from the "We." This, perhaps, is the irony at the centre of "les problèmes inhérents à la 'renaissance'." It is certainly at the centre of Ducharme's fictions of the sixties, where the individual's solitude is a condition of the radical freedom he or she aspires to.

"The heroic voyage of our time" is "the voyage into man's spirit," writes Robertson Davies.¹⁹ It is, he urges, the great Canadian voyage to self-knowledge paralleling the explorations of Magellan, Vasco da Gama, and Columbus.²⁰ Ducharme's characters are such voyagers, though they sail without benefit of compass in an element without external referents. A voracious consumer of Renaissance travel books, the diabolical rebel Bérénice would be a world unto herself in *L'Avalée des avalés*. Sailing in the abyss which is the mirror of the self, she protests to all would-be intruders, "Il n'y a que moi ici," "Rien n'importe que moi ici-bas."²¹ Bérénice repeats a dozen times: "Je suis seule."²² In *Le Nez qui vogue*, Mille Milles, who, like Cartier, de La Salle, Lewis and Clark, would set out to discover the "splendeurs du Nouveau Monde," undertakes a similar voyage in the abyss:

¹⁷Yvan-G. Lepage, "Pour une approche sociologique de l'oeuvre de Réjean Ducharme," *Livres et Auteurs québécois* (1971), 285-292; cited in Réginald Hamel, John Hare, and Paul Wyczynski, *Dictionnaire pratique des auteurs québécois* (Montréal: Fides, 1976), p. 219.

¹⁸Réjean Ducharme, *L'Avalée des avalées* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), p. 245.

¹⁹Robertson Davies, "The Canada of Myth and Reality," in *Canadian Literature in the 70's*, eds. Paul Denham and Mary Jane Edwards (Toronto: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1980), p. 14.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 14.

²¹Ducharme, pp. 9, 136.

²²*Ibid.*, pp. 7, 8, 15, 54, 86, 88, 123, 136, 193, 218, 166, 267.

"Me reviolà seul avec mes chimères."²³ Referring to Cartier, Columbus, Vasco da Gama, and Martin Alonzo Pinzon (Columbus's chief rival), Iode too would set out to discover the world in *L'Océantume*. She looks forward "d'être engloutie . . . jusqu'au plus vrai de ma solitude, d'explorer les silences sous-marins."²⁴ The Ducharmian voyage continues into the seventies. Like Ducharme's daughter of Christopher Columbus, who jettisons compass and smashed rudder after the taking of a passenger ship,²⁵ the protagonist of his *Les Enfantômes* (1976) imagines himself in "la nef de Bosch" bound for nowhere, his destination "loin au fond de mon trou."²⁶

For the Ducharme character, the age of revolution, discovery, and invention is the age of solitude. It is an historical coincidence long familiar to thinkers in "la grande lignée" of Saint-Denys Garneau's meditation. "Il n'a pas bien appris son Moyen Age et sa Renaissance, à l'école"—words from *Le Nez qui voque*²⁷—do not describe Ducharme. For some, though, writers reflecting this tradition are merely old-fashioned. André Brochu suggests this view in his ribald and uproariously high-spirited metafiction *Adéodat I* (1973): "vive la bonne chanson, la Canadienne et ses morpions, le cotillon, la danse carrée, Réjean Ducharme et compagnie."²⁸

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²³Réjean Ducharme, *Le Nez qui voque* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967), pp. 203, 155.

²⁴Réjean Ducharme, *L'Océantume* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), p. 75. Later, Iode observes: "Il n'y a rien de plus intéressant qu'une noyade" (p. 134).

²⁵Réjean Ducharme, *La Fille de Christophe Colomb* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), p. 193. The composer/narrator of Ducharme's verse novel, like Columbus's daughter, advances aimlessly: "La marche sans but et sans destination a repris" (p. 153).

²⁶Réjean Ducharme, *Les Enfantômes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), pp. 70, 292. The narrator/diarist likens the fiction to a "carnet de voyage" (p. 257). Lost in himself, he recalls: "Je roulai. Sans but . . . Sans rien enfin" (p. 134).

²⁷Ducharme, *Le Nez qui voque*, p. 270.

²⁸André Brochu, *Adéodat I* (Montréal: Editions du Jour, 1973), p. 26.