"Les Nouvelles de Cousin Emmanuel": Varieties of Salvation and Imagination in Ferron's *Cotnoir*

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One of the key words in Jacques Ferron's first novel is "sauver," to save. With its fractured time-frame, deft hyperbole, and colourful wit, this brief novel or book-length *conte* tells the story of a misfit saved from a stunting institutional life. After years in a mental institution in Bordeaux, a harmless man named Emmanuel is sheltered by his relatives, the Aubertins. The arrangement does not work out; Mme. Aubertin demands that Emmanuel be ejected from the household; and the book's title figure, Dr. Cotnoir, comes to the rescue. A question like the one the narrator asks of Aubertin—"Pour quelles raisons sauver un cousin qu'il connaissait à peine?"—can also be asked of Cotnoir.[1] As a doctor in Longueuil who serves blue-collar workers of poor suburban areas rather than residents of his own community, he might easily sympathize with underdogs like Emmanuel. However, the book identifies the active source of Emmanuel's salvation less as compassion than as imagination. Salvation and imagination, Ferron subtly suggests throughout *Cotnoir*, are intertwined.

In this brief but densely suggestive work of fiction, Ferron demonstrates complex connections among various kinds of salvation: creaturely comfort, human dignity, and art. Salvation *in the world* ties in with salvation *through the word.* The kind of imagination Cotnoir displays—the ability to dream up a scheme *and* to carry it out (specifically, his sending Emmanuel to lumber camps to learn about "la fraternité humaine" [28])—resembles the imagination of a story-teller, which is exactly what Cotnoir is to his hermitic wife. As a story-teller, Cotnoir is akin to the narrator, another doctor, who appears only a few times in the action of the book but who is always present as the remembering, recreating agent. While these two doctors, through word and deed, help bring salvation and imagination together, *Cotnoir* also depicts characters who embody ineffectual or corrupt ver-

[1] Jacques Ferron, *Cotnoir*, suivi de *La Barbe de François Hertel* (1962; Montréal: Editions du jour, 1970) 46.

sions of the imagination at work. I would like first to consider the significance of the character Aubertin and then, in much less detail, Bessette and Sauviat.

Like many figures in Québécois fiction, Aubertin, a coalman, represents a conservative Québec reluctantly inching into the modern world. From his brief biography given in chapter four, we learn that, out of jealousy, he built a house in a secluded spot because he feared the temptations of urban existence—especially another man's latching onto attractive Mme. Aubertin. As the years pass and suburbia stretches out to his home, Aubertin loses his suspicion of society, and his daughters begin to occupy his thoughts more than his wife. On the surface he may still appear like "le chasseur, l'autorité du mâle . . . fusil sur l'épaule et poignard à la main" (37), but we learn that his wife and daughters have their own sorts of power. (The oft-mentioned, patriarchal moose head on the living-room wall is dead, while the six parakeets belonging to his daughers are very much alive.) Yet Aubertin does not seem miserable, in part because of the mythic role he gives himself as "un pionnier, un fondateur," with dreams of being elected to city council and having a street named after him. He even buys a hat—something he has never owned before. His transformation from isolated individualist to community man seems complete. Then, "un jour, il reçut une lettre officielle où il était dit que la société avait besoin de lui" (39-40).

The joke is that society does not want to bestow honours or offices on Aubertin, but to ask him to take into his keeping one of its rejects, a man confined in a mental institution chiefly for having urinated playfully from a balcony onto passersby. Ferron's portrayal of Aubertin balances satire and sympathy: while the naiveté and ridiculousness of his imagination—both in his pride about his pioneering achievements and in his new social ambitions—are exposed, his pity for Emmanuel is not mocked. On his return from the city with his new responsibility in tow, Aubertin notices that Emmanuel, "un pauvre hère," is hatless and shaking with cold, so he gives him his own hat (41). The gesture is comic: the hat Aubertin might have worn as city councillor has ended up on the head of a man mentally incapable of holding political office. Yet the gesture may also show how, in the end, one compassionate act can transcend political influence and fame. Accidentally, Aubertin may gain dignity not by imagining or recalling his historical importance but by escaping his own humiliation enough to observe shivering Emmanuel's need for warmth. For one minor, fleeting moment, in the face of the cold, Aubertin is Emmanuel's saviour.

Saving Emmanuel in a larger sense, however, is another matter. Later Aubertin delivers a long, impassioned monologue which leaves no doubt that he pities Emmanuel, loathes society's mistreatment of him, and wants to do what he can for him. Aubertin has the clarity of mind to realize that Emmanuel "n'est pas un chien; c'est un être humain, un parent" (43-44); he questions the very meaning of lunacy and tells Mme. Aubertin that, if the officials had locked her up, she would have become as fearful and erratic as Emmanuel. Still, Ferron hardly bathes Aubertin in a sentimental light. Directly after the long monologue, Aubertin's self-serving attitude and ineffectiveness are laid bare. His dreams, timid and immature, cannot really do much to save Emmanuel. His wife, while indifferent to Emmanuel's plight, can see that her husband is not disinterested in grappling with the problem of Emmanuel: "[il] transformait [cette affaire] en aventure." Moreover, he quickly begins to have doubts: "Aubertin improvisait. . . . Sauver Emmanuel, mais au détriment de qui?" (46). But as a house-owner and a family man, he feels nervous about such improvising; his dream of saving Emmanuel is not grounded in a vision either practical or daring enough for reality. Aubertin sensibly realizes the impracticality of keeping Emmanuel, but he cannot imagine any better solution than to ask a gossipy, childless neighbour if she would take Emmanuel under her wing.

Ironically, Mme. Aubertin—who has objected to Emmanuel's presence from the start—promotes his welfare by calling Dr. Cotnoir. Aubertin's resentment over her control of the situation and his desperate effort to claim credit for himself undermine his genuine sympathy for Emmanuel. Just as earlier he donned his new hat on his way to the city, now, at home, hoping to confront the problem of Emmanuel with all the male authority he can muster, he puts on his Sunday best; once again, the clothes are *not* the man. "Il a, lui aussi, le dessein d'en finir au plus tôt avec le cousin . . . mais d'en finir à sa façon". Here "à sa façon" is the crucial phrase; Aubertin is as much concerned with asserting his own control, having his own way, as he is with solving the problem. Likewise, in the next sentence, "Aussi sourcille-t-il d'apprendre qu'on soit arrangé sans lui" (64), the crucial phrase is "sans lui." Ferron then traces the comic process by which Aubertin moves from a sense of disgruntled powerlessness to a sense of strained triumph. Realizing his wife's managerial skills, he becomes like "un petit garçon" (65), but, by the final paragraph of the chapter, he has regained much faith in himself:

> Il mangeait avec une lenteur appliquée, s'efforçant d'imiter les messieurs de la société

> qui satisfont à leurs besoins avec tant de distinction qu'on dirait justement qu'ils n'ont pas de besoins et qu'ils mangent pour la beauté du geste. Pourquoi ce théâtre au moment où il voyait son échec consommé? Devinait-il que sa tentative ne finissait pas avec lui, que d'autres la continueraient, que la solidarité humaine etait engagée! Oui, peut-être. En tout cas il se rendait compte qu'il y avait quelque chose de changé dans le monde, et il avait vaguement l'idée . . . que son honneur pouvait être d'en avoir eu l'initiative. (67)

Here the key phrases include "la beauté de geste" and "ce théâtre au moment," which implicitly and parodically liken Aubertin to an artist, an actor. Although in his own mind Aubertin becomes like one of "les messieurs de la société," Ferron's reference to him a few paragraphs earlier as "pape-orignal" (64) lingers in the reader's mind and points to the inaccuracy of his self-image.

The comedy in the last few sentences of the chapter is more complex and problematical. We are not to forget Aubertin's earlier eloquent defence of Emmanuel, and perhaps he can justly take some credit for Emmanuel's hopes for improvement, but the paragraph definitely focuses on his self-image rather than on his concern for Emmanuel. Aubertin's later appearances in the book reaffirm his limitations. At the end of a bizarre, remarkable, half-hallucinatory speech in which Cotnoir speaks of Mme. Cotnoir's redemptive "cahier" and maintains "Ils seront tous sauvés," the coal-man is asked, "dis-moi ce que tu penses de moi?" and his response is absurdly irrelevant: "Je n'ai jamais employé d'autre médecine que vous. Il faut croire que vous me donnez satisfaction." Cotnoir has spoken of his wife's literary ark saving humanity from the flood of "indifférance générale" (80-81), yet Aubertin thinks only of Cotnoir's down-to-earth role as a physician. Nowhere else is it clearer that the two men's minds work on different imaginative levels. Thus it is hardly surprising that, as Emmanuel is led to a car that will take him to a train destined for Quebec City, Mme. Aubertin, rather than her husband, says "Emmanuel sera sauvé . . . J'en suis certaine" (89).

While Aubertin exemplifies an imagination misled by dreams, first of pioneering individuality, then of social glory, then of honour for having initiated a change in the world, Dr. Bessette—alias Dr. Bezeau—exemplifies an imagination aggressively geared to trickery and disguise. In Aubertin the emphasis falls on self-deception; in Bessette, on the deception of others. In

various ways, Bessette is like a perverted version of Cotnoir: like Cotnoir, he had an odd marriage, but whereas the Cotnoirs share anecdotes from the doctor's professional rounds and a refining of these anecdotes into art, the Bezeaus shared injections of morphine; like Cotnoir, Bessette tells stories—stories about himself that enable him to satisfy his drug addiction by preying upon the drug supplies of deceased doctors he knew slightly or not at all. He must be a story-teller of some power and persuasiveness, or he would not be so successful in duping people. The narrator, having seen behind the con-man's mask, admits: "Je restais partagé entre l'admiration et la pitié . . . L'étonnante transformation de l'humble médecin de campagne en aventurier cynique et mordant me fascinait" (70). Although Bessette is reduced to acts such as stealing money from the cloak pockets of nuns, he is not the worst of the vultures swooping down at Cotnoir's funeral, and sometimes he speaks with vehement eloquence of an emotion he may share with the narrator: a detestation of dehumanizing funeral practices. Cotnoir's vision of a literary ark of salvation is matched by Bessette's negative and apocalyptic vision of "une religion barbare et inhumaine dont le grande croque-mort sera le pape" (56). Still, the narrator hints that Bessette is so well practiced and oily-tongued in his dealings with friends and families of the deceased that his sincerity can always be doubted: "A courir les mortalités le bonhomme avait appris à s'y faire entendre" (55). Unmistakable irony surfaces when he says things like "faux-apôtres" (57) and "Aujourd'hui on abandonne les pauvres trépassés à de purs étrangers" (56)—for what is Bessette himself if not a false stranger?

The very name of another minor character, M. Sauviat, reminds us of the verb "sauver". Sauviat, however, is not interested in salvation; his central interests are Crown Reality and Duplessis Investment, as well as his own boyish, white-haired image, which resembles that of King Edward VII. Like Bessette, Sauviat is a self-conscious actor: "il était trop fin, trop malicieux pour n'être pas le premier à se moquer de cette ressemblance même s'il la cultivait avec soin." Though Sauviat is depicted as "un gros chat dans un trou," as the manipulating king of a "royaume sordide" (71), the narrator notes that he and Dr. Cotnoir were friends. A consideration of Sauviat's character invites a consideration of Cotnoir's. Why, if Sauviat is a master of duplicity (to pun on Duplessis Investment), is the humanitarian Cotnoir his friend? Symbolically, the friendship may represent a relationship between merely flamboyant—or even sinister—imaginative acts and altruistic ones. Ferron is not content with a sentimental, black-and-white separation between salvation and damnation, between constructive and destructive fancies or deeds. More literally, the friendship may indicate that

Cotnoir has a fondness for "gloire bouffonne" (71) like Sauviat's, and for a sense of life as drama—even if that sense leads to corrupt ends.

More than fat cats and pretenders to questionable thrones, it is "les mauvais garçons, les bagarreurs, les pendus du petit peuple" (82) who inspire Cotnoir. In response to the narrator's worry about a dog on the Aubertins' back step, Cotnoir shows little sympathy. The narrator, recalling the incident, says: "Je crois qu'en vrai sauvage, en bon bandit, en homme d'honneur, il plaçait la bravoure au-dessus de tout. La médecine qu'il pratiquait ne laissait pas d'être dangereuse" (85). Cotnoir identifies with thugs and public enemies in part because in Longueuil he is considered a "médecin sans réputation . . . bourgeois encanaillé, honte de la paroisse, damné de vieille date" (21), but also because he may see in outraged brutality signs of necessary rebelliousness and determination to live. Like many a man sentimental about violence, however, Cotnoir is not violent himself. His celebration of "les bagarreurs" is qualified by his role as a story-teller for his wife; by his professional humanity (he is the only doctor around who does not screen calls from his patients); by the wise risk-taking of his scheme for Emmanuel's future; and by the selflessness of his dying words to a priest: "Un billet pour Québec" (29). In the first extensive study of *Cotnoir*, a subchapter in *Le roman canadien-français du vingtième siècle*, Réjean Robidaux and André Renaud suggest that Cotnoir's death can be seen as a sacrificial act.[2] Even if we interpret Cotnoir's dying words as a sign that he is confusing his own identity with Emmanuel's and is, in some sense, becoming—dying *into* as much as *for*—the other man, the haunting dignity of those words surpasses anything we are likely to imagine Aubertin or Bessette saying on their deathbeds.[3]

It is hard to discuss Dr. Cotnoir without discussing Mme. Cotnoir. Though he describes their relationship as being like that of a nun and a lay brother, and though he no longer even has breakfast or lunch with her, their bond is actually essential; we are told, in fact, that Mme. Cotnoir and their suppers together may be his only reasons for living. Cotnoir has no use for his wife's Old World crystal and lace tablecloths, yet his monologues at supper compose "une sorte d'oeuvre d'art; aussi, peut-être, un acte d'amour" (34). In the visionary "ark of

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[2] (Ottawa: Editions de l'Université d'Ottawa, 1966) 187.

[3] "Emmanuel" is not a particularly uncommon name (witness Marie-Claire Blais' *Une saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel*), but in a book underpinned by the verb *sauver*, the Christological associations of the name—Christ, Emmanuel, the Saviour—may be relevant . . . and ironic (Emmanuel, "the Saviour," is the one saved).

salvation" speech, Cotnoir expands on the drama he and his wife create together: "Ma femme a un grand cahier. Elle écrit ce que je dis . . . . Chaque jour, je vais aux provisions. Elle vit de ce que je lui apporte. Avec ça elle recrée le monde" (80). That Mme. Cotnoir is not merely a mechanical scribe becomes even clearer in Cotnoir's next words:

> Je la tiens au courant de tout, mais à ma façon: elle y ajoute la sienne: le drôle de monde que ce doit être! Mais il prévaudra sur l'autre, sur le vrai qui n'a pas de durée, qui se fait et se défait à chaque instant, qui s'abîme dans l'indifférence générale. Je me dis parfois que ma femme construit une arche, une arche qui flotte déja au-dessus du déluge où nous pataugeons tous sur le point d'y périr. Dans cette arche j'ai fait monter beaucoup de gens et tous les animaux que j'ai rencontrés depuis vingt ans aux mille détours du faubourg, les derniers chevaux, les chèvres de la vieille Italienne, les coqs clandestins, les chiens sans licence, les perroquets qui sont tous très vieux et ne comprennent que l'anglais, sans oublier le beau chevreuil, aperçu une fois par un matin d'automne, qui regardait Montréal et ne comprenait pas. Ils seront tous sauvés. Et toi aussi, Emmanuel. Et toi, Aubertin, avec ta femme et vos six filles, sans oublier les perruches. Et moi aussi, bien sûr. (80-81)

The narrator does not treat Cotnoir's speech as the ravings of an unhinged mind, but as the product of "une lucidité extrême," which he relates to the sudden clarity of terminal patients writing their last will and testament (80). Many readers may also take the passage as Ferron's own testament to the power of art to use the materials of banal reality—"provisions"—to create another world, a more lasting, victorious world. (Pierre l'Hérault's book on Ferron includes an entire chapter entitled "Le salut par l'écriture," which traces this theme throughout Ferron's oeuvre.)[4] However, as we will see later, to take Cotnoir's speech as Ferron's *complete* testament of salvation is dangerously limiting.

What do we know about the narrator, that anonymous doctor? At the time of the main events in the story, he is young, new to his profession, a keen observer, and a good listener; in one scene he is inquisitive enough to observe the elusive Bessette/Bezeau second-hand by watching his image in a mirror.

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[4] *Jacques Ferron, cartographe de l'imaginaire* (Montréal: Les presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1980) 218-45.

(Then Ferron plays a joke on his narrator by having him return to the mirror for further study, only to feel Bessette's hand grip his shoulder, flesh-and-blood reality interrupting mirrored images.) At the time of the narrating, a decade later, the narrator is still haunted by the hypocritical indifference of most observers at Cotnoir's funeral. The second paragraph of the book concludes: "C'était la cérémonie renversée, une sorte de sacrilege. Je n'en suis pas revenu. Dix ans après, elle me hante encore" (12). The final chapter recalls with greater intensity the narrator's anger at the undertakers, the liturgy, the priest, the fraudulent Bessette, and others who made a mockery of Cotnoir's death. Mixed with his anger is his sense of protectiveness towards Mme. Cotnoir. In chapter one, he observes her serenity, simplicity, and dignity; in chapter six, about to hear Bessette's thinly-veiled autobiography, he worries about her having just become a widow; in chapter eight, he resents that Sauviat and a notary badger her; and in chapter nine, when he escorts her into the local curé, his emotions attain a remarkably high pitch: "Je pris son bras avec une joie, une fierté que je n'ai pas éprouvée depuis" (93). No wonder then that Robidoux and Renaud have written: "le personnage de madame Cotnoir, qui intervient très peu dans les faits matériels, domine en réalité tout le roman. C'est elle, comme une sorte d'être idéal, qui est le centre de tout" (187). The narration is a forum in which the narrator lays to rest certain ghosts, honours a doctor whose own funeral dishonoured him, and cherishes the memory of a woman who rose above the crassness and opportunism around her.

The narration can also be seen as an exemplary ark, the narrator as a combination of Dr. and Mme. Cotnoir. If Cotnoir is the gatherer of materials, the igniter of images, the simple storyteller, while Mme. Cotnoir is the transformer, the shaper of finished art, then the narrator is all of these things. He watches and interacts with various people; then a decade later, beginning with a storehouse of memories, he asserts an artist's independence in his shattering of chronology for thematic or poetic juxtapositions; in his inventive, grotesque analogies—such as those between casual funeral observers and judges in a courtroom, or between undertakers and whores parading before "un client très âgé et très digne" (69); and in his imagining of many scenes at which he was not actually present. (We need not literal-mindedly insist that the anonymous doctor narrates only chapters one, six, eight, and nine, and none of the chapters in which his "je" nowhere appears. The closest we have to proof that one narrator controls the whole book is a moment when, after several pages of apparent omniscience, the narrator says with magician-like suddenness: "C'est là que je les rejoignis" [57].) In the end, we do not have Mme. Cotnoir's *cahier*—in fact,

we might even wonder if it exists only in her husband's imagination—but we do have the ark called *Cotnoir.* Rescuing the narrator's memories from oblivion, it also creates patterns and bestows fictional roles on Aubertin, Emmanuel, Cotnoir, and others; in that sense, at least, "Ils seront tous sauvés" (81).

Always a mischievous writer, Ferron nonetheless complicates his narrator's role further. One encounter between the narrator and Bessette reads like a parody of the theme of salvation. Suddenly finding the narrator, who earlier injected him with morphine—supposedly to ease the pain in his kidneys—Bessette cries out, "Ah, mon sauveur!" (57). While by the very act of narrating *Cotnoir* the anonymous doctor becomes, in terms of the ark symbol, a literary saviour, in the very ark of the book he shows himself in another light. We might even wonder if Ferron hopes to suggest that, written or read superficially and lazily, books can function more like narcotics than like arks.

To appreciate *Cotnoir* more fully, we must return to less literary meanings of "sauver"; we must recall salvation *in the world,* not just salvation *through the word.* Though in her husband's eyes Mme. Cotnoir is the artist who gives meaning to his life, the narrator emphasizes her concern for Emmanuel. After first hearing about the misfit, Mme. Cotnoir says, "Oui . . . il faut sauver ce garçon"; after calling the narrator to the house following Cotnoir's collapse, she asks first of all, "Avez-vous des nouvelles du cousin Emmanuel?"; and ever since her husband's death, she has never stopped asking about Emmanuel, as we read on the last page of the novel. A hasty reading might lead us to say that Mme. Cotnoir is concerned, not about Emmanuel *per se,* but only about his role in her husband's stories, his fictional potential. Oddly, however, she never once refers to the *cahier*—one fact to make us wonder if it is merely her husband's invention. Also, that she is not merely a hands-off gatherer of raw materials is evident early on when the narrator describes her answering of phone calls from patients. She bears insults from strangers: "sensible et incapable de mentir," she sympathizes and wonders "si elle ou son mari . . . pur faire mieux" (25). The first indifference we read about is not the "indifférence générale" her *cahier* surmounts, but that of telephone operators contrasted to her: "Une téléphoniste par son indifférence y coupe court" (80). Here her mind is not on literary salvation, but on doctoring in the most existential of situations.

The narrator's most intense encounter with Emmanuel happens years after Cotnoir's death. At a wedding reception in

the Aubertins' house, Emmanuel is lively, garrulous, amusing; his years of working in lumber camps have clearly made a difference. Thus, on his last day alive, Cotnoir had successfully doctored Emmanuel's needs with his vision of a northbound train trip. The passage recounting the narrator's meeting Emmanuel again, though less rhapsodic or poetic, is as pivotal as Cotnoir's monologue about the ark of salvation. Ferron's full testament of the imagination embraces both passages.

Leaving the transformed Emmanuel, the narrator feels "la plus grande satisfaction de ne pas avoir trompé Madame Cotnoir" (92). A clearer explanation of how he did not deceive Mme. Cotnoir comes a few paragraphs later, at the very end of the book. There, he describes an eccentric-looking stranger who appeared outside the church after Cotnoir's funeral, then reappeared in the cemetery. The real Emmanuel is on his way to Quebec City, but the narrator is so struck by the joy and freedom in the stranger's manner—and by Mme. Cotnoir's need to hear news of Emmanuel—that he tells her it is Emmanuel. He did not deceive Mme. Cotnoir, he knows years later, because imaginative truth mattered more than literal truth: the image of the stranger striding among the tombstones, relaxed, at home, unoppressed by the fact of death, was an apt image of what Emmanuel at his happiest would become because of Cotnoir's ingenuity. Across his face the Emmanuel surrogate has an expression of "satisfaction incommensurable" (92); the very wording is reminiscent of the narrator's own earlier "grande satisfaction." On the final page of the book, we may get an uncanny sense that Dr. Cotnoir's double influence—his practical influence on Emmanuel, his inspirational influence on the narrator—is captured in the image of the comic stranger. Confronting mortality with humour and zest, Emmanuel goes on to exist more comfortably within a human brotherhood; the narrator goes on to recreate and create a world. In Ferron's marvelously concentrated book, two kinds of salvation merge in one striding figure.

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