

# WATER IMAGERY IN THE NOVELS OF JACQUES POULIN

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Amongst the most common images in Jacques Poulin's novelistic universe is that of water. Its meaning is so highly charged that even its rare absence signals an important lack. Gaston Bachelard's study of water imagery is an acknowledged classic whose relevance is timeless. A reading of the Poulian corpus taking into account Bachelard's analysis<sup>1</sup> will reveal the centrality of this image to Poulin's novels and its significance.

According to Bachelard, water is one of the most difficult images to categorize, but it does appear to be, above all else,

un être total, elle a un corps, une âme, une voix. Plus qu'aucun autre élément peut-être, l'eau est une réalité poétique complète. Une poétique de l'eau, malgré la variété de ses spectacles, est assurée d'une unité. L'eau doit suggérer au poète une obligation nouvelle: l'unité d'élément. (22-23)

Poulin's writing is, in fact, a search for unity, both within the self and beyond, and so the omnipresent water imagery perfectly and naturally expresses that search. I will study the Poulian corpus in chronological order to demonstrate the subtle differences in the use of the symbol in the seven novels.

*Mon Cheval pour un royaume* (1967) is a novel about personal and social frustration and imprisonment. The protagonist, Pierre Delisle—man really is an island—is in prison for radical political activism. Political dissatisfaction mirrors personal dissatisfaction as Pierre cannot relate to those around him. In keeping with this theme, there are no natural bodies of water in the novel, except for the water in which one of the characters, Simon, drowns himself.

Virtually all other water appears in the form of tears, rain and the imaginary liquid state of his companion, Nathalie «qui commence à déborder» (104). The "solidity" of people and things, their impos-

ing physical being, seems to be an obstacle to their harmonious contact,<sup>2</sup> and so Pierre imagines her flowing out beyond herself, reaching him and touching him as would a body of water. The fact that the contact is imaginarily only serves further to underline the lack of relationships between the characters.<sup>3</sup> The restaurant Pierre frequents is called L' Aquarium, suggesting water that is contained, not in its natural setting. The novel concerns itself with personal and cultural frustration, psychological and physical imprisonment, and the absence of natural sources of water reflects that tension, the tears and rain suggesting the melancholia of the protagonist's state of mind.

Poulin introduces the notion of the rain in *Mon Cheval pour un royaume* as blue (10, 188, 189, 190), grey (188), and another time as «une pluie jaune, terreuse, terreuse et froide» (168). Water that takes on the colour of the sky or the earth, for example, is not merely decorative in the novel, but suggests an important metaphoric reality:

Les valeurs sensuelle—et non plus les sensations—étant attachées à des substances donnent des correspondances qui ne trompent pas. Ainsi les parfums verts comme les prairies sont évidemment des parfums frais; ce sont des chairs fraîches et lustrées, des chairs pleines comme des chairs d'enfant. Toute la correspondance est soutenue par l'eau primitive, par une eau charnelle, par l'élément universel, des chairs pleines comme des chairs d'enfant. Toute la correspondance est soutenue par l'eau primitive, par une eau charnelle, par l'élément universel. (46-47)

Water has the power to take on the properties of the world around it, to evoke powerful associations and to participate in the protagonist's search. Water imagery here, and in the subsequent novels, is an active element, virtually a companion to the protagonist. Pierre may feel "walled in" personally and politically, but the imagery expresses a desire for fluidity, for a blending of elements, for an ideal world of harmony. The novel embodies the dichotomy of isolation and inclusion in its water imagery.

With *Jimmy* (1969), a novel dominated by water imagery from beginning to end, water is explicitly linked to dreams: «Beaucoup d'eau dans son rêve et le rêve se jette dans la mer» (10); «À marée haute, on dort bien, on rêve mieux» (21). For Bachelard, the link between dreams and water is important:

Si la rêverie s'attache à la réalité, elle l'humanise, elle l'agrandit, elle la magnifie. Toutes les propriétés du réel, dès qu'elles sont rêvées, deviennent des qualités héroïques. Ainsi, pour la rêveries de l'eau, l'eau devient l'héroïne de la douceur et de la pureté. La matière rêvée ne reste donc pas objective, on peut dire vraiment qu'elle s'évhémérisme.<sup>4</sup> (205)

Water imagery in Poulin is not only a participant in the protagonist's quest, as we have seen in *Mon Cheval pour un royaume*, but a vehicle for transforming reality, a preparatory element in an idealized vision of the world. Jimmy's world is corrupt and collapsing, as symbolized by the rotting piles on which his house stands in the river. The imagined flood at the end of the novel, and the transformation of the house into an ark, translate the desire for the recreation of the world, the regeneration of a failed world into a new one of greater potential. The water imagery and the dream together fuse to form the vision.

Towards this vision of an ideal world of unity and harmony, water is combined again with other elements, here with fire and sky. Jimmy says that «tu pourrais croire que toute la voie lactée se reflète dans l'eau» (92-93). He notes that «sur la rive sud, à Saint-Nicolas, ou quelque part, il y a un autre feu de grève et il se reflète dans l'eau» (89) and that «la marée qui monte doucement dans le noir. . . menace d'éteindre le feu et toutes les histoires»(40).

Bachelard makes the point that «dans le règne des matières, on ne trouvera rien de plus contraire que l'eau et le feu. L'eau et le feu donnent peut-être la seule contradiction vraiment substantielle» (133). Yet even these innately contradictory elements can be combined: «Si le Soleil est le glorieux époux de la Mer, il faudra qu'à la dimension de la libation, l'eau «se donne» au feu, il faudra que le feu «prenne» l'eau» (Bachelard 134). Bachelard terms this combination «un épithalame [i.e. poem] pour le mariage des deux éléments» (134). Thus, the association of sky, earth and fire, with water, suggests the ultimate union of harmonious elements towards which the Poulian universe strives and in which water is the central link.

In *Jimmy*, the vision is internalized as the protagonist proclaims «L'eau me rentre»(75) and associates «l'eau de la mer et les yeux» (80). This process of internalization foreshadows the later novels and points to a vital relationship between the world and the inner being.

The dream, then, links the material world and the idealized world, as the sky and earth, fire and earth, earth and water and water and the self are incorporated into one another in the world of the imagination. Bachelard states that «L'être qui sort de l'eau est un reflet qui peu à peu se matérialise: il est une image avant d'être un être, il est un désir avant d'être une image» (Bachelard 49). The Bachelardian notion of the desire preceding the image and the image the being is a perfect summary of Poulin's novelistic world. The dreamed-of ideal world waits to be born as the vision is elaborated and the desire constantly reformulated.

Focused as it is entirely on questions of life and death, *Le Coeur de la baleine bleue* (1970) portrays water as the vehicle of the «bateau fantôme»: «Il tombait une lourde pluie d'automne que le nordet plaquait aussitôt contre la vitre . . . . On ne voyait pas la côte de Lévis et on entendait par intervalles mugir la sirène d'un bateau fantôme» (25). References to the «bateau fantôme» appear as well in *Mon Cheval pour un royaume* (81) and *Le Vieux Chagrin* (Chapter 31). Bachelard explains this preoccupation with the ship of death as an adventure of the soul:

Ainsi, l'adieu au bord de la mer est à la fois le plus déchirant et le plus littéraire des adieux. Sa poésie exploite un vieux fonds de rêve et d'héroïsme. Il réveille sans doute en nous le échos les plus douloureux. Tout un côté de notre âme nocturne s'explique par le mythe de la mort conçue comme un départ sur l'eau. Les inversions sont, pour le rêveur, continu-elles entre ce départ et la mort. Pour certains rêveurs, l'eau est le mouvement nouveau qui nous invite au voyage jamais fait. Ce départ matérialisé nous enlève à la matière de la terre. (103)

The protagonist, Noël, has had a heart transplant and is intensely conscious of the fine line between life and death, and so water, «la plus maternelle des morts» (Bachelard 100), becomes associated here with images of death.

The protagonist's apartment in Quebec City overlooks the St. Lawrence. That mighty waterway forms a backdrop to the novel, and most of the water imagery appears in the form of ice. A series of boats are described as «prisonniers de la glace» (60-61), two «traversiers» are «immobiles au milieu des glaces» (101), and much of the discussion in the novel takes place between Noël, and Bill, an ice-hockey player, about their passionate interest in that

most Canadian sport. Just as Noël feels obsessed with thoughts of death, trapped between life and death, the water is frozen into ice, reflecting the main character's feeling of helplessness. The life-force is immobile, all movement suspended.

The opposite phenomenon occurs when water joins with earth to form mud: «alors commence l'expérience de la «liason», le long rêve de la «liason». Ce pouvoir de lier substantivement, par la communauté de liens intimes, l'ouvrier en rêvant sa tâche, l'attribue tantôt à la terre, tantôt à l'eau» (143). When Pierre dreams of the world reborn after the explosion in *Mon Cheval pour un royaume*, he is «à plat ventre dans la vase fraîche» (175). Before the "flood" in *Jimmy*, three of the characters try to re-build the world themselves in the sand: «Lucy, Jenny, et la nageuse de longue distance sont en train de construire tout un village avec des maisons, des routes, un pont, un garage, une église et tout» (89). Bachelard explains the mixture of earth and water as a form of creation: «Les vrais travailleurs sont ceux qui ont mis «à la pâte». Ils ont la volonté opérante, la volonté manuelle. Cette volonté très spéciale est visible aux ligatures de la main. . . Si Bouddha a cent bras, c'est qu'il est pétrisseur» (146-147). The frustration of immobility is expressed by the image of ice, but the desire to recreate the world in keeping with the ideal is translated by the image of the union of earth and water.

In *Le Coeur de la baleine bleue*, Noël's attachment to life is still expressed through water imagery in spite of the predominant images of ice. When his doctor advises him to move, Noël responds «que je tenais autant à voir le fleuve qu'à ma vie, que je préférerais courir le risque»(66). And when he finally accepts the inevitability of his death, that, too, is expressed in a similar way: «Alors j'ai compris que la douceur était le sentier qui menait à la mort et aussi que la mort était comme un fleuve» (144). As Noël is about to die, his friend, Simon, says to him «Je la [la porte] laisse ouverte pour que tu entendes la marée» (200). Whether it is water on which the «bateau fantôme» floats, the ice in which boats are trapped, or the water which travels towards death, the water imagery in this novel about death is complex as it reflects Noël's angst about the relationship between life and death.

However, the novel concerns itself equally with the *acceptance* of death as it does about death itself, about understanding as much as about fact. For that reason, water imagery, as we saw in *Jimmy*, is internalized and becomes a force within the individual: «Le coeur

battait tranquillement et je me laissai envahir petit à petit par le sommeil qui semblait monter du fond de moi comme une grande marée» (18-19). The inner voyage towards an understanding of the self is expressed in similar terms: «Quand vous voyagez à l'intérieur de vous-même, les courants vous entraînent fatalement vers votre enfance» (147). Bachelard refers to subterranean water as «cette eau intérieure» (203) and suggests that in the realm of the poetic imagination it has the power to purify the ground under which it flows. In the same way, Poulin's internalization of the image suggests healing on a personal level. As Bachelard succinctly puts it, «L'eau dans son symbolisme, sait tout réunir» (203). The very course of coming to terms with life, and with death, finds expression in this same image. Poulin's novels until *Le Vieux Chagrin* are about process, not result, and the complexity of water imagery serves to reflect the intricacies of that process.

*Faites de beaux rêves* (1974), which takes place on a course for race cars in Quebec, is the least introspective of the novels, the most pessimistic, and has much less water imagery than the other novels. It is as if, after staring death in the face in the previous novel, Poulin needed to distance himself from such intensely personal confrontations. The result is a novel that is more despairing precisely because it avoids the central issues that make Poulin's novelistic universe seductive, albeit bittersweet in tone.

The only references to water are Jane's mention of her brother's death by drowning (164), Amadou's immersing himself in the river (49-50), and the recounting of the Indian legend of America born of the waters (139).

Drowning occurs in several of the novels (cf *Le Coeur de la baleine bleue* 100) and emphasizes the polyvalence of the image of water. It is a life-force, a healer, a purifier, but it is also potentially threatening. Like life itself, which it symbolises more than any other single image, it is complex and mysterious, embodying contrary aspects of nature and human nature.

The protagonist, Amadou, nicknamed Madou, like Poulin's other protagonists, searches for meaning, but he is trapped and terribly frustrated by the environment in which he finds himself. The racetrack, and the monitoring of the race, symbolize the futility of his life and of those in whose company he finds himself.

It is revealing that the only sustained image of water in the novel, other than the Indian legend, is one in which Amadou im-

merses himself in the river, to the dismay of his brother. The water is cold:

Elle était même frette. Elle était frette en calvaire, je n'ai pas osé me baigner. Je suis resté au bord et je me suis lavé la figure. Mais mon frère Madou est entré dans l'eau comme si c'était le Gulf-Stream. Il s'est même assis au fond de la rivière, il avait de l'eau jusqu'au cou et je pense qu'il est resté là à peu près une demi-heure. (49-50)

Bachelard comments that the water of the river is a purifying force:

À l'eau pure on demande donc primitivement une pureté à la fois active et substantielle. Par la purification, on participe à une force féconde, rénovatrice, polyvalente . . . La meilleure preuve de cette puissance intime, c'est qu'elle appartient à chaque goutte du liquide. Innombrables sont les textes où la purification apparaît comme une simple aspersion. (193)

The contrasting reactions of Amadou and his brother are striking. The water is too cold for Théo, but Amadou immerses himself and remains in the water as if a rite were being acted out. In the novel most dominated by frustration, futility and despair, the protagonist seeks out an active ritual of spiritual cleansing. His immersion takes on the qualities of a personal encounter with the primitive life-force in a quest for meaning.

The Indian legend of the creation of America in *Faites de Beaux Rêves* recounts that the earth once had no people:

L'espace, aussi loin que vous pouvez voir devant vous, était rempli par un vaste océan. Il n'y avait pas de soleil ni de lune ni d'étoiles, de sorte que la lumière n'existait pas et que tout était ténèbres. Au-dessus du vaste océan se trouvait un grand vide d'air. (136)

The waters are called «les eaux sombres» (138). It is here that «la Femme Céleste» falls to the floor of the waters, brings earth, and creates «une grande île que l'on appelle maintenant l'Amérique du Nord» (139). This "generic" creation story contains the primordial elements of virtually all creation stories, including the essential ingredient of water.<sup>5</sup> That there is a creation story at all in this novel is noteworthy. Its presence betrays a need for regeneration, new beginnings, hope for a better future. Just as the ritual "bath" suggests the

potential for spiritual rebirth on the personal level, the Indian legend evokes the same longing on a cosmic level.

*Les Grandes Marées* (1978) is a satiric look at society and its failings, given the ideals of unity, harmony and sensitivity that Poulin has set out in his previous writing. The novel treats water imagery, not with the reverence it commands in the earlier and following novels, but with irony, as befits the context. «Ilots de verdure» are plants in office buildings (13), the sun's reflection on the water appears as a picture on a man's shirt (125), and the protagonist dreams that he and his brother are on an island together—Alcatraz (140). In addition, the tides, instead of bringing refreshing waves of cleansing water, are associated with all the problematic characters brought to the island («Tout le monde est arrivé dans l'île au moment des grandes marées» 162).

An even greater irony is that the story does unfold on an island and that the protagonist's solitude, surrounded by the waters of the St. Lawrence, holds real promise for a new life, a genesis unmistakably akin to the biblical one. The renewal is not to be, and the situation ends up as nothing more than failed potential. The protagonist's companion, Marie, enters the water «en s'aspergeant» (37), which, we have seen above, is a ritual act, and swims fearlessly in the waters surrounding the island. Bachelard calls the swimmer «un héros précoce» (218) and observes that «le saut dans la mer ravive, plus que tout autre événement physique, les échos d'une initiation dangereuse» (222). The protagonist, Teddy Bear, on the other hand, less "heroic" and therefore more subject to the vicissitudes of life, does not really swim until he is exiled from the island by the crass intruders when he must make his way to another island retreat (199).

If the absence of water reveals a spiritual lack, as it does in *Faites de Beaux Rêves*, its presence, then, does not necessarily guarantee the realization of the Poulian ideals. Quite the contrary in *Les Grandes Marées*. All of which is preparatory to *Volkswagen Blues* (1984), in which water imagery appears in its most ambiguous and polyvalent (varied) form. Water is linked in this novel with annihilation of the Indians of North America, and yet constitutes an indispensable part of the protagonist's search for meaning and for the self. So much so that his very name, Jack Waterman, incorporates the elemental substance.

La Grande Sauterelle, Jack's companion, who is partly Indian, points out to him the Indians' tragic fate: «Pendant de nombreuses



années, tous les Indiens qui passaient par la vallée de la rivière Illinois firent un détour afin d'éviter le Roher, car c'était un endroit habité par la mort et par les esprits de la tribu qui avait été exterminée» (116). As the Grande Sauterelle reveals the history of the various Indian peoples, it becomes clear that their demise is always associated with bodies of water. One massacre took place «sur les bords de la rivière Washita» (206), another at Sand Creek, «un ruisseau qui se trouve à 70 kilomètres du Fort Lyon» (205), and the final Indian defeat «au bord d'un ruisseau qui s'appelle Wounded Knee» (207). Bachelard recognizes this link between waters and death:

Eau silencieuse, eau sombre, eau dormante, autant de leçons matérielles pour une méditation sur la mort. Mais ce n'est pas la leçon d'une mort héraclitéenne, d'une mort qui nous emporte au loin avec le vourant, comme un courant. c'est la leçon d'une mort immobile, d'une mort en profondeur, d'une mort qui demeure avec nous, près de nous, en nous. (96)

In fact, this meditation on death opens Jack's eyes to the realities of North American history and allows him to begin his search for meaning within himself. The ideal world he had been looking for across America does not exist beyond the self, either in the past or in the present. This point is tellingly made by an old woman whom Jack and la Grande Sauterelle meet:

Elle disait qu'elle chantait maintenant pour réchauffer le coeur des hommes et des femmes qui, un jour, avaient possédé une maison, des parents et des amis quelque part sur le vaste territoire de l'Amérique et qui, après avoir tout perdu, avaient été emportés par le courant et étaient venus échouer sur les bords du Pacifique. (279)

The Indians' loss is generalized as part of the condition of modern man whose dreams for a better world have ended in failure. Jack's quest is doomed in the material, topographical sense, but leads him back to his own, inner resources.

It is only as the novel ends that Jack's inner search truly begins, but that search is alluded to, again through the medium of water imagery. All of chapter fifteen concerns Jack's withdrawal into himself, in which he cuts himself off completely from the world. That state is called «le complexe du Scaphandrier» which compares it to a diver who isolates himself in a diver's suit at the ocean's depths. In addition, as pointed out above, Jack's very name is associated

with water, suggesting that his identity is linked with that image. At the end of the novel, as he prepares to return to Quebec, and his companion will stay in San Francisco to find herself, which will be in effect an exploration of the self for both, la Grande Sauterelle cites Daniel Boone: «Je me sens parfois comme une feuille sur un torrent. Elle peut tournoyer, tourbillonner et se retourner, mais elle va toujours vers l'avant» (289). Here the water imagery and the inner state are clearly associated. All the waterways of the novel, great and small, become internalised to carry the protagonists on their currents towards the realities of the inner self. They had to travel the continent's rivers to discover that the only one that matters is the one that leads them back to themselves.

*Le Vieux Chagrin* (1989) combines the major themes of the previous novels and does so through the inevitable and necessary water imagery.

All of the novels are about a protagonist's quest for the authentic, inner self, and this is never more true than it is here. They are also studies of frustrated writers attempting to express themselves, as every protagonist, except Jimmy, is a writer. (Jimmy's father is a writer.) And they all search for the «royaume» of the first novel, a world of peace, harmony and unity which eludes them. *Le Vieux Chagrin* achieves a synthesis of these issues.

It is established from the beginning that this is a novel centered on water as the protagonist makes the point repeatedly that his house had been moved from the city and was the only one «au milieu da la baie» (10). The other major site in the novel is a cave which is located «tout à fait au bout de la baie, près d'une petite crique sablonneuse» (13). In addition, absolutely every aspect of the novel, including the most ostensibly minor ones, is associated with the waters: the preface is a poem called «Le Fleuve caché»; Jim, the protagonist, consoles la Petite, his adopted daughter, with a song titled «L'Eau Vive».

This is a novel of revelations, all of which involve the water. Jim's brother talks to him about Jim's idealized woman, Marika, the elusive inhabitant of the cave, as the two men cross the St. Lawrence: «Nous étions rendus au milieu du fleuve et il soufflait une petite brise rafraîchissante. C'était un de ces moments où l'on a le sentiment que tout est parfait et où l'on voudrait que le temps s'arrête» (70-71). Jim finds the «paradis terrestre» for a fleeting moment, a place of perfect harmony and inspirational beauty, in Venice, a city

on the water (Chapter 29). La Petite tells Jim about her discovery of her real parents and their indifference to her when they are beside the river: «je crois bien que le fleuve, tout à côté de nous, le vieux fleuve qui, pendant trois siècles et demi, avait entendu les confidences de tout un peuple, retenait son souffle lui aussi» (135).

That this vital image is attached to the profound personal and global aspirations of the protagonist is anticipated by Bachelard:

Fort de cette connaissance d'une profondeur dans un élément matériel, le lecteur comprendra enfin que l'eau est aussi un type de destin, non plus seulement le vain destin des images foyantes, le vain destin d'un rêve qui ne s'achève pas, mais un destin essentiel qui métamorphose sans cesse la substance de l'être. (8)

Water is the constant companion of most Poulian "heroes" because of its association in the imagination with the very essence of what it is to be human and to be searching for meaning.

Meaning in the Poulian fictional universe is irrevocably associated with writing, and this is a novel about writing as much as it is about anything else. Not only is writing linked here to the expression of the authentic self, to consoling oneself for the sadness in life and to reconciling oneself to the world and to others, writing and water imagery are intimately related. Jim's fear of not being able to write is compared to «un vieux puits asséché» (81) and he always writes facing the river: «Il [le fleuve] donnait, me semblait-il, un peu de force et de régularité à ma pauvre inspiration» (47).

Bachelard calls water «la maîtresse du langage fluide» (250), explaining that language and water are fundamentally the same: «la liquidité est, d'après nous, le désir même du langage. Le langage veut couler. Il coule naturellement» (251). Water speaks, as does language, and what it speaks of is the very idea of the Poulian ethic: «L'eau aussi est une vaste unité. Elle harmonise les cloches du crapaud et du merle. Du moins une oreille poétisée ramène à l'unité des voix discordantes quand elle se soumet au chant de l'eau comme à un son fondamental» (260). The writer searches for his "voice"; that is, the truth about himself and the world, beside the waters, because the two must be harmonized, the one in concert with the other:

les voix de l'eau sont à peine métaphoriques, que le langage des eaux est une réalité poétique directe, que les ruisseaux et les fleuves sonorisent avec une étrange fidélité les paysages muets, que les eaux bruissantes apprennent aux oiseaux et aux

hommes à chanter, à parler, à redire, et qu'il y a en somme continuité entre la parole de l'eau et la parole humaine. (22)

The writer and the waters exist in a symbiotic relationship as nature and human nature complement one another and nourish one another spiritually and artistically.

The Poulian adventure, which crosses boundaries of time and space, only to find itself most deeply involved in issues rooted in the self, is inextricably linked to water imagery. The unity Poulin seeks for the world and for the self, the search for meaning in life and in death, the place of writing and the role of the writer are fundamentally and intricately linked to the waters. The great dream of the human imagination, says Bachelard, is that of the «substance valorisée», be it the waters or the word, which holds the key to life, which reveals the mighty secret:

C'est la loi même de la rêverie de puissance: tenir sous un petit volume, dans le creux de la main, le moyen d'une domination universelle. C'est, sous la forme concrète, le même idéal que la connaissance du mot clef, du petit mot, qui permet de découvrir le plus caché des secrets. (194)

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *L'Eau et les rêves, Essai sur l'imagination de la matière*, Paris: Librairie José Corti, 1987. All quotations taken from this edition with page numbers in brackets following the quotation.

<sup>2</sup> He imagines himself as a stone in the river with the water passing over him (60) and he describes himself as a being walled in by his "carapace".

<sup>3</sup> Rain, while natural, is associated with, "des larmes cosmiques," with "l'eau-mère du chagrin humain, la matière de la mélancolie" (Bachelard 89).

<sup>4</sup> évhémérisme: "doctrine pour laquelle les dieux du paganisme sont des personnages humains divinisés après leur mort", Robert, 1976, 644.

<sup>5</sup> Eliade, Mircea, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, Meridian Books, Cleveland and New York, 1970, 212.