

“Watch your language!”

The Special Effects of Theatrical Vulgarity

Language is always a hot-button issue in Québec, whether we are talking about the status of French vis-à-vis English or the quality of Québécois French vis-à-vis international French.¹ In the 1960s, when writers began to use Québécois French in literary texts, the language issue exploded into *la querelle du joul*. While *parti-priste* authors and Michel Tremblay used *joul* to underscore the cultural poverty of urban working-class Québécois, others believed with Michèle Lalonde (*Deffense et illustration de la langue québécoise*) that *joul* could express the creative genius of a people. While the debate about the quality of Québécois French seemed to quiet down in the seventies and eighties as the political status of French was strengthened by the passage and enforcement of language legislation, the argument has been renewed in the nineties, sparked by polemical attacks within the academic community. Linguists are arguing over the publication of Québécois French dictionaries while French teachers debate the pedagogical strategy of stressing communication over correctness.² The politics of nationalism and class resentment have inevitably coloured the debate as Québécois French has become a sign of political correctness. Those who advocate linguistic correctness, the teaching of standard oral and written French, have been labeled cultural élitists, purists, and (worse yet) petty bourgeois *francisants*.³

While linguists, essayists, French professors, and editorialists inveigh, we are reminded of critic Lucie Robert's comments on the crucial role of language in theatre. Here is how she summarized the political dimension of Québec dramatic language:

Ainsi, le théâtre représente la langue; il en donne une image publique; il l'affiche. L'on sait aussi le rôle fondamental que le théâtre a joué dans la légitimation de la langue française et de ses usages particuliers au Québec, en inscrivant l'acte de dire au coeur d'un combat politique à caractère national. C'est la dramaturgie, c'est-à-dire l'écriture, qui a contraint le théâtre à afficher sa dimension nationale, puisqu'elle s'écrit nécessairement dans une langue concrète, nationalement déterminée; puisqu'elle affiche la parole, c'est-à-dire aussi la voix, l'accent et la variation linguistique. ("La langue du théâtre" 97)

Since dramaturgy is above all a speech act and dramatic action is often what Robert calls "un combat pour la maîtrise de la parole," the levels of language used on stage become important indicators of the state of Québec society. As Robert says, "Québec drama deals in all possible ways, even an obsessional way, with the problem of language. It keeps asking how to speak, to say what, in what circumstances, and to create what effect" ("Toward a History" 759).

To clarify our use of terms without taking sides in the linguistic debate, we take the term "Québécois French" or *français québécois* to mean the variant of French used daily by approximately six million North Americans. Standard or normative Québécois French is a grammatically correct variety of European French that includes some *québécoisismes*, word usages specific to Québec. Popular (vernacular or colloquial) Québécois French is the daily oral speech of Francophones and is characterized by its accent, vocabulary, and some grammatical incorrectness. The term *joual* is often used pejoratively to designate the variety of Québécois French spoken by the urban working class, and it assumes an excessive use of anglicisms, vulgarity and swear words. While normative Québécois French (or *le français québécois correct*) has become the norm in poetry and fiction, popular oral language dominates the stage, still a site of linguistic contestation. In the tradition of *Les Belles-Soeurs*, contemporary playwrights highlight language issues in ways that may avoid invective and ideology, but cannot avoid carrying a political charge. Yvan Bienvenue, Daniel Danis, François Archambault, Jean-François Caron, Serge Boucher, Raymond Villeneuve, and others dramatize the social and psychological implications of vernacular and vulgar Québécois French in works that should make the essayists and editorialists drop their (poison) pens. *Joual* and popular Québécois French are no longer used to make an ironic statement about the lower classes as in Tremblay's *Les Belles-Soeurs*, nor as a political declaration of independence as in Jean-Claude Germain's *Si les Sansoucis s'en soucient, ces Sansoucis-ci s'en soucieront-ils? Bien parler c'est se respecter* (1971). *Joual* is not used as an assertion of cultural virility as it was in Jean Barbeau's *Joualez-moi d'amour*

(1971), nor is popular Québécois French used as much for humorous effect as it was by Gratien Gélinas's *Fridolin* or by Yvon Deschamps. In the nineties, the dramatic spectacles of *joual* and vernacular Québécois French are most often part of a stinging critique of contemporary society, its moral and spiritual bankruptcy and its failure to provide the wherewithal for individuals to fulfill their emotional needs.

Ironically, popular forms of Québécois French, which were symbols of popular counter-culture for many sixties leftist intellectuals, are proposed as the norm by some leftist cultural nationalists of the nineties (for example, Pierre Monette). The stance they take against the teaching of standard oral French and grammatical correctness has taken on an aggressive, anti-intellectual, vaguely homophobic tone. Rejecting the normative Québécois French advocated by the Office de la langue française as too much like *le français de France* also means rejecting authority, cultural imperialism and the Catholic Church, which was responsible for the educational system for centuries. If contemporary Québec theatre confirms the triumph of vernacular Québécois French, close analysis reveals what an empty victory it has been. Dramatic language in Québec during the last decade has presented the spectacle of a degraded, vulgar, anglicized, ungrammatical language—the *français approximatif* denounced by Georges Dor, Jean Larose, Jacques Godbout, and others. The fact that Montreal's theatre-going public expects to hear popular rather than normative Québécois French seems problematic to actor/dramatist René-Daniel Dubois, who calls this phenomenon "*un signe de repliement*" (see Vaïs).

For the generation of playwrights who have emerged since the nineties, colloquial Québécois French is not just the guarantor of authenticity and cultural specificity that it was for eighties dramatists such as Marie Laberge. It is often a negative sign of Québec's failure to overcome its lower-class origins and its marginal status, a sign that many Québeckers have lost the battle for verbal mastery referred to by Lucie Robert. When put in the mouth of educated, middle-class characters, the slang form of Québécois French suggests the vulgarization of a Québec demoralized by the materialism and individualism of contemporary western society. The inability of Québeckers to express themselves—an inability that purists blame on the language so zealously defended by cultural nationalists—is an obstacle to emotional and spiritual well-being. When contemporary young dramatists add heavy doses of vulgarity to their work, they are clearly doing so for reasons which undermine the cultural nationalists' desire for a distinctive language. A

generation ago, the use of vulgarity by educated intellectuals signaled a rebellious “in-your-face” attitude not unlike the “*épater le bourgeois*” strategy of the French Romantics or Jarry or Céline. Today, verbal obscenities and vulgarity creep into everyday discourse to such a degree that much of the shock value of swear words, scatological terms, and explicitly sexual language has been lost. Still, when playwrights use obscene and vulgar language, critics must explore the intent and the effect of such usage.

In the discussion that follows, we will explore different uses of vulgarity in recent plays. The blend of popular Québécois French and obscenity is in some instances part of an aesthetic that has been variously labeled neo-realist, super-realist, or hyperrealist and it demands that we see theatre as a site of social commentary as we did in earlier decades. Crude, ungrammatical popular speech is the “*langue blessée*” that Sherry Simon speaks of as part of an “*esthétique de la faiblesse*” (111-13). In other cases, playwrights use but transcend the vulgarity of everyday language in creating a poeticized, stylized dramatic discourse specific to Québec. The renewed self-consciousness about language in theatre has prompted critics such as myself to talk about a *dramaturgie de la parole* characterized by the exploration of different levels of language and their social and psychological implications.⁴ Much of this experimentation has taken place in monologues and dramatized oral tales precisely because of the playwright’s acute awareness of using the language of ordinary speech in a literary manner. What we are seeing here is a metalinguistic discourse in which language becomes the spectacle. This is hieratic rather than demotic speech, and the monologue or oral tale form accentuates the literariness of the play.

In the case of Robert Gravel’s trilogy, *La tragédie de l’homme* (1997), the use of joulized Québec French is dictated by his goal of creating a *théâtre du quotidien* and it is conventional in the sense that levels of language mark class and generational divisions as well as educational background. In *Durocher le milliardaire* (1991), for example, the wealthy businessman speaks a neutral or standard French—grammatically correct, somewhat pretentious, without any trace of a regional accent. His two children, well traveled and well educated, speak very correctly except when making sexual overtures to the filmmakers who are seeking financial backing from their father. Their language of seduction contains some of the elisions, anglicisms, and slang that we hear in the joulized French of the three visiting filmmakers, but only the lower-class characters use the “*ostie*,” “*ciboire*,” “*sacrament*,” “*ouais*,” “*chus*” that signal popular oral speech. In the third play in the trilogy,

Il n'y a plus rien (1992), set in a nursing home, the grammatically correct, standard French (that is, without the transcribed orality that marks vernacular Québécois French) spoken by the paralyzed nun and her brother aligns them with the Catholic élite that dominated in the pre-Quiet Revolution period. As their obsession with reading obituaries suggests, they are part of a dying culture. The rest of the large cast of characters converses in a joualized popular speech that reveals their materialism and vulgarity. Disgusted by what he hears and sees of this “*bande d'impolis . . . des mal élevés,*” the nun’s brother tells them “*Vous ne savez pas vivre et vos propos sont insignifiants*” (216). Unfortunately, this sentence could be used as a blanket condemnation of most of the characters in Gravel’s trilogy and therein lies the tragedy. In his “*Préface*” to the published edition, Jean-Pierre Ronfard suggests that while we may laugh at the pretentiousness of the well-spoken élitists (rich people, intellectuals, conservative Catholics) and at the imbecilic mediocrity of the “*joualisants,*” Gravel’s work is profoundly tragic (11-12). These plays are tragedies without heroes and without notable actions because Gravel wants us to take note of the tragic nature of everyday life. This (post)modern tragic aesthetic, certainly not unique to Québec, assumes the failure of language, both élitist intellectual discourses and everyday popular speech. It displays a degraded form of speech, full of grammatical mistakes, anglicisms, swear words, and sexual slang, which takes on a highly political charge in the context of the larger debate about Québécois French.

One aspect of the vulgarization of Québec dramatic discourse that should be underscored is that it crosses class, gender, and educational boundaries. While audiences might expect the homeless and mentally deranged characters of Gilbert Dupuis’s *Mon oncle Marcel qui vague vague près du métro Berri* (1991) to speak a vulgar, street version of Québécois French, they don’t expect to hear gutter language in the chic apartments of junior executives as is the case in François Archambault’s *Cul sec* (1996). When young women playwrights of the nineties use graphic and obscene language, it has nothing to do with the *prise de parole* of feminist playwrights of the seventies and eighties. Clearly, “*parler beau*” is no longer a goal since intellectual and moral authority is no longer linked to linguistic correctness.

In the collective show *Les Zurbains* mounted by the Théâtre Urbi et Orbi in April 1997 at the Salle Fred-Barry, two of the more shocking *contes urbains* are by young women identified as high school students. Annie Goulet gives us a contemporary Québec version of “*L’invitation au voyage*” in “*Quand, la Floride?*” (25-35), in which winter depression induces erotic

tropical fantasies about a waiter encountered in a café. The storyteller is very aware of the fairytale aspect of her fantasy; in fact she asks, why not reverse the pattern of Cinderella, Snow White, and Sleeping Beauty and let the woman make advances to Prince Charming? But her romantic dreams are x-rated. Here is how she describes the *coup de foudre* that accompanies her order of hot chocolate:

“J’t’apporte ça tout de suite!” qu’y m’a dit avec un de ces sourires. C’était du protocole, je l’svais, mais ça m’a quand même brassé les hormones. Toute mon corps s’est mis à bouger sans s’en rendre compte. Mes doigts martelaient la table, un après l’autre, mes jambes se tortillaient comme une envie de pisser, mes yeux s’enflaient pis s’enflaient en même temps que mon clitoris—j’avais presque oublié qu’il existait, lui—pis ma tête dansait une p’tite salsa avec ce Dieu-là du sex-appeal qui préparait pour MOI un bon chocolat-chaud-crème-fouettée.

J’ai sorti ma carte pour payer, pour occuper mes doigts avant que je creuse le comptoir jusqu’en Chine. “Garde le change,” que j’y aurais dit. C’est ça le problème, le gouvernement s’arrange pour abolir la cruise avec la monnaie électronique! Quand il a pris la carte dans ma main, pis qu’il a frôlé mon doigt, c’est ben simple, j’suis v’nue. Pas v’nue comme dans arrivée, là, v’nue . . . comme ça, de même, dans mes culottes. V’nue comme dans v’nir, comme dans jouir. Le cri qu’j’ai étouffé pour pas trop qu’ça paraisse, c’est fort à faire trembler la terre. Même un gros neuf sur l’échelle de Richter, c’était pas assez pour égalier les vibrations de mon sexe qui en r’venait pas. C’est drôle, j’suis v’nue pis j’en suis pas r’venue. Fuck! (27-28)

The title of the story by Julie Desmarais-Gaulin points to the social commentary implicit in these *contes urbains*. “*Détresse de la classe moyenne*” (19-24) tells the story of Julie, a sixteen-year-old girl from a middle-class suburb, who decides to escape from her glass prison and have a true downtown Montreal adventure. Her nightmarish experience includes booze and bad drugs in a rock ‘n roll club, plus witnessing sexual violence and exploitation, yet for her it is a “*soirée de délivrance totale*” (24). For Desmarais-Gaulin and others, education and middle-class material comfort cannot cure the existential distress that provokes this prayerful preamble to her tale:

Aidez-moi! Pitié! Aidez-moi quelqu’un avant que j’dégueule tout l’sstress que m’impose mon retour dans la prison du savoir. Chu pus capable d’rester accrochée icitte mais j’sais pas comment sacrer l’camp. Aidez-moi à m’sortir de c’té marde monumentale-là. Aaaaaaaah! . . . (19)

Thrill-seeking as an answer to contemporary *ennui* is also the subject of “*L’Absolu, c’est pour quand?*” by Anne Dandurand, whose daring erotic texts established her reputation as a postfeminist writer in the eighties.⁵ This story, reworked from an earlier piece for *Les Zurbains*, recounts a fifteen-year-old

girl's seduction and murder of a rock star. In simple, declarative sentences, this *petit enfant du siècle* describes the horrifying acts of a precocious, amoral, blasphemous sexual predator.

When verbal vulgarity is not counter-balanced by poetic passages, moralizing pronouncements, psychological insights, or clear social commentary, it risks losing its impact. For example, critics could not miss the poetry and moral tone of Yvan Bienvenue's *Règlements de contes* (1995) and *Dits et inédits* (1997), nor the linguistic self-consciousness of Daniel Danis's *Celle-là* (1993) and *Cendres de cailloux* (1992)⁶; accordingly, they were willing to see the obscenity and vulgarity as part of the authors' dark visions of contemporary urban society. In the case of Archambault's *Cul sec*, they were less kind. Mariel O'Neill-Karch, for example, summarizes the play by calling it "une pièce peuplée d'automates programmés pour l'ingurgitation de quantités industrielles d'alcool et la copulation à la chaîne" ("*Théâtre*" 396). Christian Guay calls it "un portrait acide et hyperréaliste d'une génération de yuppies en mal de vivre" (182), a repugnant portrait whose crudity and lucidity raise disturbing questions (183). Archambault's explanation of his writing strategy sheds light on the issue of theatrical realism and vulgarity. Writing in the drama journal *Jeu*, he says:

Je n'écris pas pour qu'on me dise: "Mon Dieu, comme c'est bien écrit." Je ne suis pas là pour promouvoir mon talent, je suis là pour questionner ma société et ses choix. [...] En fait, tout mon travail d'auteur consiste à faire semblant de ne pas exister. Laisser toute la place aux personnages et chercher à créer des scènes déstabilisantes, afin d'éviter à tout prix une écoute confortablement passive.
(Archambault 12)

The action of the play is simple: Serge and Eric invite their friend Michel to forget about his girlfriend for one night and participate in their contest to see who can sleep with the most women. After watching a pornographic film and tanking up on vodka, the three men go off to a bar where they pick up Nancy, Josée, and Mélanie, three women who also lack all sense of moderation, morality and decency. While the men disgust us by using the terms "poupoune" (13), "cochonne" (14), "plotte" (22), "pitounes" (28), " salope" (76), and "conne" (77), the women are equally vulgar as they discuss intercourse, oral sex, and penis size in uncensored language (38-41, 54). As the night goes on, they drink, vomit, talk about sex, pair-off for lovemaking, and argue. Like *Le Déclin de l'empire américain* but without gourmet food, historical sensibility, modesty, conscience, and remnants of romanticism, *Cul sec* takes the critique of middle-class materialism, hedonism, and

individualism further with its use of swear words, scatological terms, sexual slang, and anglicisms. The setting is a comfortable modern apartment and the characters are educated and employed. As a result the lewdness and vulgarity of the dialogue seems all the more shocking. This brief exchange is from early in the first act after Serge, the host, cuts himself shaving:

SERGE. *Fuck! Ostie que c'est de la merde ces rasoirs-là! Ç'a de la misère à te couper un p'tit poil du cul, mais ça te fait des crisses de tranchées dans'peau!*
MICHEL. *Cou'donc, ça lui prend ben du temps, Éric.*
SERGE. *Y doit être en train de se crosser dans son char.* (15)

And here is how Nancy complains when the men leave to get more vodka:

Ostie que je me fais chier, quand même! J'aurais dû boire plus, là-bas! C'est ça qui arrive quand tu comptes sur les autres: tu te fais fourrer. Je te dis qu'y est pas trop responsable, Serge! Un gros party, mais pas de boisson, crisse! Ça doit être le genre de gars qui se rend compte qu'y a pas de condom juste à' dernière minute; juste quand toi tu mouilles comme les chutes Niagara, ostie! (38)

François Archambault's decision to use this level of popular Québécois French is clearly motivated by the same hyperrealistic aesthetic that we see in the works of other young playwrights of *la relève* such as Yvan Bienvenue, Jean-François Caron, Serge Boucher, Jean-Rock Gaudreault, Jérôme Labbé, Yves Bélanger. These writers are, for the most part, well educated intellectuals, often graduates of the *Conservatoire d'art dramatique de Québec*, the *École nationale de théâtre du Canada*, or the theatre program of some francophone university. The point is that this is a self-conscious use of language by playwrights who are perfectly capable of expressing themselves in correct standard French but who create characters who speak a coarse, ungrammatical, slangy form of Québécois French. It seems obvious to assume that what Larose calls "*l'amour du pauvre*" (127-44) or Simon labels "*l'esthétique de la faiblesse*" (118) motivates this choice. If, however, the playwright does not point to his/her use of different levels of language, the scabrous popular speech loses much of its effectiveness as social commentary.

Serge Boucher is an excellent example of a young dramatist using vulgarity for theatrical effect and social/psychological commentary. An UQAM-educated high school teacher of French with a degree in theatre from the Collège Lionel-Groulx, Boucher's first serious plays, *Natures mortes* (1993) and *Motel Hélène* (1997), belong to the category of "*tragédie du quotidien*." The structure and themes of *Motel Hélène* reveal an acute sensitivity to levels of discourse, distinctions between literary and oral language, erotic and vulgar sexual vocabularies.

In *Motel Hélène*, we see three characters living out their sad lives in an unnamed small city in the Eastern Townships. Having returned home from living in Montreal, François operates the “*dépanneur*” owned by his father as he tries to come to terms with his homosexuality through writing. In the journals he keeps, he also records observations on Johanne, a seamstress who lives in the apartment adjacent to his store, and on her errant boyfriend, Mario, an auto mechanic. Although she is just twenty-five, Johanne appears much older and spends a lot of time obsessing about her sex appeal (her breasts, her hair, her clothes), since sex is very important in her life. Still haunted by the disappearance and presumed death of the son she had by Mario at age sixteen, she blames herself because she locked the boy out of the house for dirtying her freshly washed kitchen floor. In the thirty brief scenes of the play, we see Johanne give in to despair. The “Motel Hélène” of the title is the place where she claims to have spent a passionate night in air-conditioned comfort with a handsome man she met at the mall, but at the play’s end, we learn that the mystery lover was pure erotic fantasy and that her second visit to the Motel Hélène will end with her suicide.

There is very little action in this “tragédie du quotidien” and most of the talk is mundane, but Boucher’s play would still receive an x-rating for adult content: nudity, sex, and vulgar language. Close analysis reveals subtlety in the representation of sexuality. In scene 8, for example, Boucher has Mario read a long passage from a “*Recueil de lettres érotiques*” in which the author describes culinary and sexual uses of bananas. After reading the erotic recipe which is written in euphemistic, flowery French, Mario reverts to his own crude speech, commenting “*Osti sont sautées ben raides eux autres! Avec une banane dans chatte, faut l’faire. [. . .] Toé, un bout d’la banane dans fente pis moé l’autre bout dans l’cul!*” (32). Both Johanne and Mario talk and joke about sex in the raunchiest terms and his seduction techniques are decidedly crude. Arriving at Johanne’s apartment late at night at the end of scene 1, he sticks his foot between her legs and asks, “*T’es-tu lavée la nounne comme faut?*” (13). In scene 16, he arrives drunk, eats a few slices of ham, and then uses whipped cream for some high-cholesterol foreplay on the kitchen table. The scene fades to black as he spreads whipped cream on his genitals and says to Johanne, “*Viens manger moman! Ma belle cochonne! Mange la belle grosse banane à Mario!*” (51). Johanne’s use of sexual slang and vulgar expressions matches Mario’s. The day after the whipped-cream scene, this is how she tells François that Mario left after making love to her: “*Quand y a eu son nanane, y’é parti. (Temps.) Y m’ramone la cheminée pis y*

crisse son camp” (54). Her Motel Hélène fantasy, while influenced by the erotic literature she and Mario read, is cheapened by her crude vocabulary:

C’t’un gars qui é ben dans sa peau, ça paraît, écoute quand on est arrivés dans chambre chu restée assez bête, y a parti l’air climatisé pis y s’est déshabillé, y s’est mis tout nu tu-suite, j’avais pas encore déposé ma sacoche j’pense, y’était déjà flambant nu, y a dit: “J’prends une douche, mets-toi À ton aise.” Y’a une queue comme dans les lettres que Mario lit, j’me disais: “Ça s’peut, ça s’peut,” j’en r’venais pas, j’me suis mise à trembler, le mélange d’la chaleur pis d’l’air climatisé, la peur de pas être capable j’imagine, y’é r’venu tout nu, tout trempé, c’est à croire que j’avais pas bougé d’un poil, y a dit: “T’es pas rendue loin.” Y s’est approché d’moi, y sentait ma peur, y m’a embrassée, ya bandé d’un coup, chu partie à rire, lui y’était pas gêné, y a pris ma main pis y l’a mis su sa queue, y m’a déshabillée, gentiment, y a placé ma robe sur le p’tit fauteuil qu’y’avait dans l’coin, j’en r’venais pas, y a enlevé ma brassière, ma p’tite culotte, y m’a prise pis y m’a amenée dans douche, y m’a lavée, y m’a savonnée partout, j’sentais son pénis sur mon côte, y m’a passé plusieurs fois un doigt dans chatte, on s’est ramassé toute mouillé sur le lit, y faisait déjà plus frais dans chambre, y’était pesant pis doux, y m’a mangé la chatte, j’y’é sucé la queue, y m’a pris, j’y’é mangé les testicules, on a pas arrêté d’la nuit, j’ai du sperme partout sur moi, j’sens lui, j’sens l’homme . . . (61-62)

Boucher’s careful use of language here suggests a radical dissonance between emotional needs and the ability to communicate them. The only language Johanne has available to her—the degraded slang of everyday life among the lower classes—cheapens her dreams and seems inadequate for expressing love. The frequent linking of eating and having sex in the play seems to suggest that the two activities are equivalent forms of appetite satisfaction. The scenes that express Johanne’s eroticism most eloquently are, ironically, scenes without words: scene 11 in which she dances to her favorite song while vacuuming in her new high heels, scene 14 in which she caresses her own breasts and then peels a banana, scene 28 when she does a sexy strip dance in her heels. Explaining this use of “body language,” Boucher says “*le tragique surgit souvent lorsque les mots ne répondent plus à l’appel du corps*” (“*Le tragique quotidien*” 31).

The character of François serves as a *porte-parole* for the playwright: he observes and comments on Johanne’s life in ways that show an acute awareness of his narrative function. In his opening monologue, he calls himself “*un voyeur*” who pays attention to the details that speak volumes about her although she does not speak herself. Three times he mentions the distance that separates him from what he observes and writes about in his black notebooks. His speech, while still marked by the elisions, mistakes, and

pronunciation of popular speech, contains rhythms, repetitions, and vocabulary that elevate it to literary language. Here are his first words:

J'me demande encore comment ça s'est fait que sa porte était ouverte. Ça s'est peut-être qu'une porte soye ouverte quand a devrait être fermée juste pour qu'un gars un soir enregistre ben comme faut tous les détails qui font une vie, l'image de toute une vie. Je l'avais souvent vue sur sa galerie, mais vue sous cet angle-là jamais. De dos, par derrière, à son insu, comme un voyeur, un voleur, non jamais. De la distance qui me sépare d'elle, j'sais pas si cette femme assis s'a galerie est heureuse ou pas, à quoi elle pense, ce qu'elle ressent véritablement, j'en sais rien. Mais tout autour d'elle parle. Ça parle pour elle. C'est peut-être ça au fond que j'trouve triste. (7)

Boucher makes numerous references to literature in the play. Noting François's habit of reading and writing during his long hours in the store, Johanne asks him to recommend a book in scene 1, something not too difficult that she can read during her vacation (8-9). When he lends her three books in the following scene, she jokes about hating reading when she was in school and asks "Pourquoi tu lis ça toutes ces livres-là?" to which he replies "J'sais pas . . . ça m'aide . . . à vivre!" (16-17). In a later scene, he describes how he used to play at being a school teacher when he was a child and, instead of laughing at his transgendered fantasy, Johanne tells him that he would make a good parent because he is sweet, calm, thoughtful, and ambitious. Education has liberated him, she says: "Toi, t'es pas pris, t'es pas pogné dans ta peau, t'écris, tu lis plein d'livres, t'es libre en quèqu'part . . ." (42). Later, he explains that he reads and writes to become "un bon citoyen" (47).

In addition to talking about his writing, François and Johanne often read passages from the black notebooks in which he records his thoughts and observations (sc. 9, 21, 23, 27). This *mise-en-abyme* underscores Boucher's self-conscious literariness and manipulates the spectator's view of Johanne. After reading a passage that reminisces about the big Sunday breakfasts she used to prepare for her son and Mario, Johanne makes a remark that accentuates the distance between the vulgar language of her everyday life and the literary transformation of it contained in François's black notebooks. Sadly, slang Québécois French seems the perfect language to talk about her unhappiness:

JOHANNE: *J'ai l'trou d'cul en d'sous du bras!*

FRANÇOIS: *Quoi?*

JOHANNE: *Tu sais pas c'que ça veut dire hein? Ça veut dire "chu fatigué," j'ai la plotte à terre, le trou d'cul en d'sous du bras, t'as jamais entendu ça? Des expressions pour dire qu'on en peut pus, qu'on est rendu au bout, crisse que j'ai-tu hâte à vendredi. (33)*

Reading from the notebooks forces Johanne to recognize some pathetic truths about her life, truths that contribute to her decision to kill herself.

While Boucher employs vulgarity to dramatize the pathetic lives of characters who live marginal existences, without benefit of education, family, spiritual or economic comfort, another young playwright of *la relève*, Raymond Villeneuve, uses vulgar oral speech with irony to make a darkly humorous commentary on contemporary Québec society. Like others in his cohort (François Archambault, Yvan Bienvenue, Wadji Mouawad), Villeneuve studied at the *École nationale du théâtre du Canada*. His highly original short piece, *Le Mutant* (1997), contains virtuoso displays of language that recall the verbal delirium of René-Daniel Dubois's early works, including references to history, science, and culture. In *Le Mutant*, however, we also hear obscenity, slang, and the anglicisms of urban street culture expressing outrage against the established power structure. Compared to the coarseness of the impoverished, impotent characters of *Motel Hélène*, the foul-mouthed outbursts of *Le Mutant* seem like a healthy venting of anger.

The main character, who has been spaced out on drugs and alcohol for years, is obsessed with the idea of mutating to a higher life form, and so he has climbed to the top of the cross on Mont Royal from where he intends to take off with his pet rat, Mumu. He may be crazy, but he is also well educated and well informed about current events. At the beginning of his ranting monologue, he gives us his version of human history, from the Big Bang to the Internet Age, in jocularized Québec French that increases the comic effect. He believes that human history is all about moving on, from the known to the unknown; but now everything has been explored on Earth:

L'histoire de l'humanité est finie! Le Big Bang est over! On vient d'pogner un mur, ostie! LE MUR! . . . On peut pas aller ailleurs! . . . Pis si on peut pas aller ailleurs quand on s'en va . . . ben tout c'qu'on peut faire . . . c'est d'partir en vacances, ostie! Pis ça, c'est citoyen en chien, mon p'tit rat! FUCK THE ROAD! [. . .] Pis anyway . . . anyway, anyway . . . même si y restait des ailleurs en quequ'part . . . même si y restait un p'tit trou où on pourrait partir, ostie . . . ben moé j'te dirais quand même que . . . au boutte de n'importe quel voyage . . . de n'importe quel trip . . . de n'importe quel buzz . . . Y'a toujours un retour, ostie! . . . Pis ce retour-là . . . c'est toujours . . . ou bedon . . . d'oussé qu'tu pars . . . ça c'est bad en chien . . . ou bedon . . . qu'essé qu't'es . . . Ça, c't'encore pire! FUCK THE ROAD! Y'a pas d'ailleurs! (10-11)

His best chance to evolve further is to wait for a lightning strike on top of the lightning rod on the Mont Royal cross.

As he waits, he pours out his theories and opinions to Mumu (and the

audience) and recounts his wild experiences among Montreal's underclass, that is the homeless, mentally ill, drug addicts, and sexual deviants. His speech is filled with urban slang, anglicisms, scatological references, and swear words, yet he is perfectly capable of alluding to Shakespeare, *National Geographic* magazine, Frankenstein, Beethoven, Mohammed, and Einstein (9-12, 35). His references to the October Crisis, the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, Green Peace, mutual funds, and free trade prove that he is not completely out of touch with the real world (12, 27, 32, 35). The fact that he talks about Hollywood films, Michael Jackson, and writing dramatic pieces for an actor friend indicate that he is very aware of theatricality. In fact, when he notices the arrival of police cars, fire trucks, and television news crews beneath him, he seems determined to give them the performance they expect:

Sont toute là! . . . toute les parasites, toute les sangsues, toute les vermines! . . . Sont toute là . . . pour se nourrir d'une bonne histoire heavy, ostie! Sont v'nus voir . . . un show! Toute c'te monde-là y bouffent d'la misère humaine . . . pis y'ont faim, estie! . . . Y'ont faim! . . . Y courent partout la bouche ouverte pis y'attendent jusse que j'fasse que'chose pour le bouffer, ostie! FUCK YOU!

[. . .]

Y veulent un show! . . . Ben t'chèque ça, mon p'tit rat: t'chèque ben ça! Mon onc' va leur en faire un! Un ostie d'show!

[. . .]

Y veulent . . . que j'saute! [. . .] . . . plus j'avance, plus y jouissent! Plus j'avance: plus y mouillent leu' tites culottes! Plus j'avance, plus y bandent! Y'attendent jusse que j'me chrisse en bas! Y'ATTENDENT JUSSE ÇA! (32-33)

But the show he really puts on is not the suicide leap they expect but rather a wild-eyed sermon on the mount that condemns contemporary society in colourful and often obscene terms.

The Mutant's most vulgar outbursts come in verbal assaults on those who have the power to judge, exploit or harass him. Linguistic violence is his way of getting even and it is important to note that much of the cursing is in English. Early in the play, he looks down on the city and screams "FUCK YOU!", accompanied by the usual hand gesture. Satisfied by this release of anger, he says to Mumu:

Fuck you . . . Ostie qu'ça fait du bien! Hen, mon p'tit rat! . . . J'ai beau êt' super génial! pis ben plus brillant que toute ces citoyens-là mis ensemble! Mais ostie qu'ça fait du bien . . . PAREIL . . . d'êt' au-d'ssus de toute c'te monde-là pis d'es envoyer chier! . . . D'une shotte! Rien qu'd'une shotte! Fuck you ev'rything! Fuck you ev'ryone! Fuck . . . you!

Sourire béat du Mutant.

Ostie qu'ça fait du bien. . . (14)

Talking about the pathetic, lonely people wandering around the park, the Mutant expresses scorn for those who give in to despair:

Ceux qui m'font le plusse vomir passe qu'y sont les plusse citoyens de toutte la gang . . . C'est les désespérés! . . . Passe qu'y ont perdu leu' blonde, leu' job, leur char, leu' p'tit bonheur à cinq cennes . . . y viennent icitte pis y font comme moi . . . y grimpent jusqu'en haut . . . y t'chèquent la ville de Montréal . . . mais au lieu de l'envoyer chier . . . Y chiâlent! . . . Y s'plaignent! . . . Y braillent su' eux aut'! . . . (15-16)

Calling those who commit suicide cowards, he says it is better to turn disappointment into anger that can be purged by cursing.

Ostie qu'y sont lâches! Jamais on f'rait ça toé pis moé, hen! . . . Jamais on s'chrisserait en bas . . . passe que d'faire ça . . . ça s'rait d'donner raison en chrisse aux ostie d'citoyens pis au système qui nous encule! FUCK YOU! (16)

He may speak “la langue blessée,” “le code mixte” described by Sherry Simon as symptomatic of cultural poverty (109-27), but he has discovered that obscenity can be therapeutic and help him avoid self-destructive nihilism.

The seriousness of Villeneuve’s message is, of course, undercut by the messenger: a drugged-out lunatic who thinks he is God and talks to a coke-sniffing pet rat. Still, there is something very compelling about the Mutant’s appeal for followers, a call that invites them to leave the material world behind and mutate to a higher level of consciousness (34-38). When an oncoming thunderstorm disperses the crowd below, he says:

HEILLE PARTEZ PAS! PARTEZ PAS! CHU DIEU, OSTIE! . . . FUCK! (38)

He survives being struck by lightning, claims to have been resurrected, and continues appealing (in vain) for disciples.

The language of *Le Mutant* is a hybrid tongue penetrated and contaminated by English that reveals the speaker’s madness and escape fantasies. The play is a disjointed linguistic orgy in an “*idiome bâtard*,” “*incertain*,” and “*fantasmatique*” (see Simon 109-27). But I would argue that for Raymond Villeneuve, vernacular Québécois French laced with obscenities, swear words, and anglicisms is a rich idiom. He uses it to create an imaginative, hallucinatory discourse in which the vulgarity signals an energetic counter-cultural resistance to power élites. This is not the *français approximatif* that linguistic purists warn against; on the contrary, this is akin to the verbal virtuosity that we have heard in plays by other *dramaturges de la parole québécoise* from Jean-Claude Germain to René-Daniel Dubois to Yvan Bienvenue.

The use of vulgar language seems to be a healthy expression of anger and it reminds us that Québec theatre has often been an expression of collective

dispossession and linguistic distinctiveness combined with a protest against social, economic, political, and intellectual élites. It seems ironic, then, that so many alarms have been raised about the quality of language at the same time that Francophones are attempting to reverse the conquest of Québec by protecting the French language, implementing policies of “francisation,” and democratizing higher education. As the standard of living rises in Québec, linguistic standards decline, as witnessed by the willingness of some leftist cultural nationalists to tolerate grammatical errors, anglicisms, profanity, and crude sexuality.⁸ Whereas actors and television personalities once tried to lose their Québec accents and speak proper French, lower-class speech now seems to be a sign of authenticity and solidarity with collective aspirations. Québec theatre continues to use a vernacular language increasingly marked by grammatical errors, anglicisms, profanity, and crude sexuality. The playwrights of *la relève*, born after the beginning of the Quiet Revolution, did not receive the *collège classique* education of preceding generations and therefore their models are more likely to be Michel Tremblay and Victor-Lévy Beaulieu than Molière and Corneille. Raised in the era of sex, drugs, and rock ‘n’ roll, this generation is understandably more liberal in its social, sexual, and linguistic habits. Self-conscious about their role as social and political commentators, they take seriously the nationalist project of creating a specific Québécois literary language.

All of this can be seen as a sign of a society turning in on itself. Continuing the process of global refusal begun in the period of the Quiet Revolution, Québec remains suspicious of the authority of the old élites, whether this authority emanates from Paris (cultural), Rome (moral), or Ottawa (political). By insisting on speaking and writing in a language characterized by its geographical specificity, Québec playwrights run the risk of increasing marginalization, of cutting off dialogue with other French-speaking countries, of consigning themselves permanently to regional minority status.

There is also the danger that this theatre of the quotidian creates an impression of realism and authenticity that masks its literariness and serious social criticism. Once spectators get over the shock of hearing profane and sexually explicit talk, they should hear the message that verbal violence expresses the frustration and rage experienced by people who lack communication skills and that sexual coupling is often a poor substitute for emotional bonding in contemporary society. The humiliated language that became part of the spectacle of cultural, material, and spiritual poverty in Michel Tremblay’s *Les Belles-Soeurs* has degenerated further to the point

that it can be called an offensive language, part of an attack on bourgeois complacency. Gravel's trilogy, Archambault's *Cul sec*, Boucher's *Motel Hélène*, Villeneuve's *Le Mutant*, and the young dramatists whose voices are being heard in collective creations such as *Cabaret des neiges noires*, 38, and *Les Zurbains* speak the language of despair and solitude, warning of a loss of hope in the future.

The paradox is, of course, that the use of popular oral language on the stage and the transcription of vernacular speech in dramatic texts are creating a highly self-conscious literary language. As the well-educated, intellectual playwrights of *la relève* experiment with levels of language in hyperrealist plays, they are de-oralizing *joual*, poeticizing ordinary speech, engaging in a metalinguistic exercise that makes language itself the spectacle on the Québec stage. In so doing, they restore some of our faith in the ability of language to communicate and in the power of dramatic literature to articulate contemporary concerns.

NOTES

- 1 For an updated history of the debate on the quality of Québécois French, see Bouchard.
- 2 See Lamonde for a summary of the debates. See also Dor, Larose, Godbout et Martineau, and Laforest.
- 3 For a sample of the rhetoric, see Monette.
- 4 See Moss "Larry Tremblay," "Daniel Danis," "*Cendres de cailloux*."
- 5 See von Flotow.
- 6 For a summary of the critical response to Bienvenue's work, see Moss, "Yvan Bienvenue and *conte urbain*."
- 7 Here I am alluding to Marc V. Levine's *The Reconquest of Montreal*.
- 8 To be fair, a similar phenomenon is occurring in the United States where conservative commentators decried the effort of some African Americans to legitimate bad English by playing the identity politics card and calling it "Ebonics." Many have also lamented the vulgarization of public discourse signaled by the popularity of Howard Stern, Jerry Springer, "gangsta" rappers, and a host of foulmouthed comics.

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