

NARRATIVE, CARNIVAL, AND PARODY

Intertextuality in Antonine Maillet's Pélagie-la-Charrette

Michèle Lacombe

Au dire du vieux Louis à Bélonie lui-même, ce rejeton des Bélonie né comme moi de la charrette, seuls ont survécu au massacre des saints innocents, les innocents qui ont su se taire.

— Et c'est comme ça que je sons encore en vie, nous autres les exilés, par rapport que j'ons consenti à sortir d'exil et rentrer au pays par le cul d'une baleine!¹

ACCORDING TO LINDA HUTCHEON, the intertext is generated by a reader who recognizes, responds to, and activates the textual referents brought into alignment by the author in a contract with the reader.² As with any self-reflexive text, Antonine Maillet's epic novel *Pélagie-la-Charrette* (1979) is brought into being, in the reader's mind or experience, by the interplay of three factors: text (in this case the unique combination of story and narrative that is signalled by the hyphenated title); context (historical referents, here specifically pertaining to the survival of the Acadians); and intertext (the sum total of allusions, influences, parallels, and comparisons, both implicit and explicit, with other texts).³ The foregoing quotations from the novel suggest that the relation of identity to fiction is a central paradox explored by *Pélagie*; according to Maillet, in a comment which echoes both Jacques Ferron and Gilles Vigneault, "mon pays c'est un conte."⁴ Into this known equation she introduces a new element: if Acadie survives primarily through its storytellers, and if Maillet literally finds herself situated at the transition point between orality and writing, then her text enacts or translates for the reader the simultaneous birth and death of history, culture, and language.⁵

Acadians have survived, rather paradoxically, through their silence, that is to say through the growth of a strong oral tradition in the face of ever-present threats — illiteracy, expropriation, assimilation: "Après ça, venez me dire à moi, qui fourbis chaque matin mes seize quartiers de charrette, qu'un peuple qui ne sait pas lire ne saurait avoir d'Histoire" (12). *Pélagie's* reader must therefore confront

the presence in the intertext of a considerable body of Acadian legend, myth, and folklore in addition to echoes of the Bible (specifically Exodus), the *Odyssey*, Rabelais' *Gargantua*, and Longfellow's *Evangeline*, among other texts.⁶ Simple folk elements include songs ("Et j'ai du grain de mil"), proverbs ("N'éveille pas l'ours qui dort"), and oaths ("Et merde au roi d'Angleterre"), leit-motifs that illustrate the billingsgate aspect of popular speech located by Bakhtin at the heart of Rabelais' work and of the linguistic marketplace.⁷ These tags are also used to punctuate folk narratives based on Acadian legend, narratives which begin by interrupting the action only to merge with major episodes in the story: Bélonie's traditional tale of the white whale, for example, is significantly altered by the exiles' escape from Charlestown prison, "the belly of the beast," while an Acadian variant of the Flying Dutchman legend is radically revised by Beausoleil's capture and rechristening of an English ship used to deport the Acadians. In both cases the oral tradition rescues the action but is irrevocably changed in the process. For Maillet, this complex, shape-shifting relation between signifier and signified is further complicated by the added movement from oral to written forms of discourse. The oral tradition becomes part of the canon questioned by subsequent generations of chronicler-storytellers, and joins the classical texts (all epics traditionally situated at the margins of the oral and the written) parodied by the author through her primary narrator.

This playful treatment of the oral tradition situates *Pélagie* within the domain of fantasy rather than historical realism as a more appropriate genre for exploring the relation of myth to history. The model for this fabulous blurring of story and narrative, the real and the imaginary, writing and the oral tradition, does not come from Latin American fiction so much as from Mikhail Bakhtin's work on the carnivalesque in Rabelais and popular culture. For Bakhtin, Rabelais is of consequence precisely because he bridges the gap between medieval and Renaissance world-views:

The primitive and naive coexistence of languages and dialects had come to an end [with the Renaissance]; the new consciousness was born not in a perfected and fixed linguistic system but at the intersection of many languages and at the point of their most intense interorientation and struggle. . . . In these exceptional conditions, linguistic dogmatism or naivety became impossible. The language of the sixteenth century, and especially the language of Rabelais, are sometimes described as naive even today. In reality the history of European literature presents no language less naive.⁸

Creating the illusion of orality, Maillet is in fact writing at a stage of Acadian culture which reproduces these conditions: ". . . au dire du vieux Louis, cette Acadie-là qui sortait du bois en riant des yeux et en roulant les rrr . . . ne se serait point marié en blanc" (349). Maillet's approach to narrative, carnival, and especially parody, a term which Linda Hutcheon has recently expanded to dis-

place the notion of plagiarism,⁹ are the three aspects of *Pélagie's* language that I will address as part of its self-reflexive strategy for subverting the lapses of history.

NARRATIVE VOICE AND THE MULTIPLICATION of narrators through a combination of framing and Chinese box effects are those aspects of the novel which, despite their complexity, have received the most critical attention to date.¹⁰ René LeBlanc has recognized that the novel's action, constituting the return of the heroine and her people to their devastated homeland and encompassing a fifteen-year journey by oxcart from Georgia to Grand Pré, is relatively simple, while the narration of that journey, filtered through many generations of conflicting storytellers, is extremely complex.¹¹ Kathryn Crecelius, focusing on doubling motifs and patterns of repetition, argues that these serve to underline "une narration en abyme," and describes the novel as "le récit de la (re)création d'un passé à la fois vrai et imaginaire."¹² James Quinlan, addressing the novel as poetry, identifies the dual function served by the title's personification — Pélagie-the-Cart is both "object and subject, vehicle and sign."¹³ In this context I am reminded of Craig Tapping's reading of George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin* as a post-colonial text — citing Kristeva, his comments could easily apply to *Pélagie*: "the novel is the truth about which it writes, embodies and unfolds the process it describes."¹⁴

If Maillet's response to the injustices of history seems to substitute poetry for politics, it is because she recognizes the strong links between language and freedom. The breastcloth/handkerchief which Pélagie opens to the winds and folds into her apron pocket is a dominant symbol for the relation between what Naim Kattan terms "desire and power."¹⁵ At once empty and full, it is a female emblem of potentiality, a "country of the heart" or realm of possibility never finally denied/fulfilled. This "uncertain country" is nonetheless *linguistically* embedded in a world that is fully realized and fully Acadian:

Et dans sa poche de devant, elle enfouit aussi des mots, des mots anciens aveindus à cru de la goule de ses pères et qu'elle ne voulait point laisser en hairage à des gots étrangers; elle y enfouit des légendes et des contes merveilleux, horribles ou facétieux, comme se les passait son lignage depuis le début des temps; elle y enfouit des croyances et coutumes enfilées à son cou comme un bijou de famille qu'elle laisserait à son tour en héritage à ses descendants; elle enfouit l'histoire de son peuple commencée deux siècles plus tôt, puis ballottée aux quatre vents, et laissée moribonde dans le ruisseau . . . jusqu'au jour où un passant la ramasserait, et la ravigoterait, et la rentrerait de force au pays . . . (340)

This passage follows the climactic moment when Pélagie faces the double realization that she is dying and that home no longer exists in Grand Pré, and as such it locates Acadia within the ever-renewable world of fiction. The narrator's iden-

tity finally merges totally with that of her ancestor and namesake; this dual Pélagie in turn is closely identified with Maillet herself, in keeping with Hutcherson's recognition of the author's role in the reader/text interface, and clarifying this author's insistence that "je suis parole."¹⁶ In the breakdown of subject-object distinctions that accompanies the verb made flesh, history is personified, feminized, and appropriated. Rather than quietly containing her tears, Pélagie's hankie amplifies sentiment, making room for the deluge: it is large enough to accommodate the white whale metamorphosed into the sleeping giantess. Because the tale is never ended, the quest can go on.

At this juncture a double diagram might clarify *Pélagie's* form: the first represents the two conflicting story lines, and focuses on narrative; the second represents the triple odyssey, focusing on story.

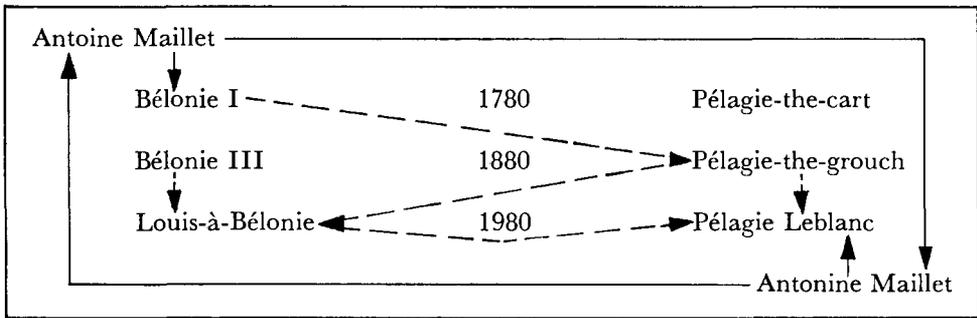


DIAGRAM I

<i>Phantom Cart</i>	<i>Pélagie's Cart</i>	<i>Phantom Ship</i>
1. Death — Bélonie	Life — Pélagie	Rebirth — Broussard
2. Exodus — Christian	Great Disruption — Acadian	Odyssey — Classical
3. Myth — "Légende" (Whale)	History — Genealogy (American Revolution)	Literature — "Conte" (Rabelais)

DIAGRAM II

It should be noted that in Diagram I, Pélagie Leblanc is the name of the novel's primary narrator. The multiplication of narrators is now seen to be marked by

circularity as well. The fact that Bélonie I descends from a Parisian immigrant named Antoine Maillet, really the author's ancestor, like the dedication of the novel to the memory of Virginie Cormier, the name of Maillet's mother but also of the character who becomes the cart of life's mascot, underscores the interpenetration of real and imaginary observed by Crecelius. The use of repetition with difference in the prologue and epilogue which frame the novel marks the distance which the *reader* has travelled in the interim: with the ritual chanting of family names at the end, a form of greeting in the imperative mode, we are now informed and prepared to enter the narrator's carnivalesque world. The playful recognition and celebration of identity is complete as soon as the reader acquires the knowledge for bringing it to life, a context which only the novel and its reading can provide:

— Grouillez-vous, bande de flancs mous! Personne viendra vous nourrir à la louche ni vous border au lit. Aveindez-vous de vos trous et venez prendre votre place au soleil. (351)

Our entry into the text is facilitated, for example, once we are familiar with the events signalled and assumed by Diagram I: 1880 is the date of the first Acadian national conference in Memramcook, when the people literally and metaphorically emerged from the woods and entered recorded history/writing. This was an occasion for Rabelaisian feasts of storytelling, and for Maillet every reading of the chronicling tradition, however contentious, becomes another such occasion. As the first to *write* the feast, however, she has had to invent a new, "nonexistent" language, one which I have already indicated convinces us that it is not writing at all but true Acadian speech. The power of this illusion is such that my first complete reading of the novel, on December 25, 1979, was while seated at my mother's feet: for the first time since my childhood, she quite naturally adopted the highly formal role of storyteller, decoding the text by uncritically breaking into song in a way that I, the would-be bearer of gifts, could not. Maillet at once suspends an endless number of layers between the reader and the truth/past, and recreates "original" events by conferring upon them the immediacy of an archetypal fairytale endlessly repeated. Citing Bakhtin, Linda Hutcheon reminds us that parody (here directed to the oral tradition) can celebrate as well as satirize: "through the paradox of its authorized transgression, the parodic appropriation of the past reaches out beyond textual introversion and aesthetic narcissism to address the 'text's situation in the world.'"¹⁷

THE MULTIPLICATION OF NARRATORS evident in Diagram I is matched by the multiplication of carts in Diagram II, first and foremost by the hyperbolic growth of the original cart into a caravan and ultimately an entire

people. The circularity emphasized by my diagram of the narrative structure, however, is not reproduced here, but rather is replaced by the parallel lines of the three principal players' movements. These intersect at several crucial moments and in one crucial locale, Salem marsh, to explode the illusion sustained throughout that their journeys progress independently. Pélagie's quest is at once threatened and renewed by her predilection for the wily captain, as it is by the haunting presence of Bélonie, the chinwagger who at first appears to embody the dead past. The point of intersection, when the Cart of Life is rescued from the "slough of despond," occurs when Broussard's phantom ship defeats Bélonie's phantom cart by bringing with him into battle Bélonie II, the centenarian's last living relative, long presumed dead. However, Broussard wins only because Bélonie agrees to stave off the Grim Reaper, and because Pélagie offers up her life in exchange for that of her lover. It is at this point that my two diagrams also come into alignment: "car sans ces conteux de Bélonie, fils de Bélonie, l'Histoire aurait trépassé à chaque tournant de siècle" (11).

In addition to summarizing the broad outlines of the story, Diagram II serves to introduce the topic of intertextuality as yet another layer of the novel's action, leading us to the related issues of carnival and parody. The diagram provides the main textual points of reference for the three protagonists, referents in all cases supplemented by historical and legendary material, real or imagined, attributed to the oral tradition. Bélonie is repeatedly compared to an Old Testament prophet leading the chosen people into the promised land, or recording that quest for their descendants. Broussard Beausoleil, whose name associates him with pagan sun-worship and fertility gods, blends the characteristics of king and outlaw, earning him the nickname "Robin Hood of the Seas" and creating a parallel with Homer's Ulysses, while his crew, particularly the giant P'tite Goule and the dwarf fool Pierre à Pitre, belong to the world of Rabelais' *Gargantua*. Finally Pélagie, accompanied by the ghost of Evangeline in the form of the silent, war-scarred orphan Catoune, is of course contrasted with the heroine of Longfellow's epic.

The parallels with biblical events are fairly straightforward; these provide epic analogues that situate *Pélagie* within an old and honourable tradition. Even when the allusions possess ironic overtones, "repetition with difference" serves to recontextualize and demystify both scriptural and Acadian episodes in a parodic enterprise that Linda Hutcheon sees as clearly distinct from mere "ridiculing imitation."¹⁸ Maillet plays with the limits of her text's relation to its precursors, even occasionally mocking intertextuality itself in order to privilege "pure" story — for example, when the narrator informs us that if the twins Charlécoco had been literate "ils se seraient pris eux-mêmes pour de petits Pharaons" (31) but that their ignorance of any history other than their own fortunately saved them from such a fate, tradition and education would seem to be a burden. The insertion of "eux-mêmes," however, implies the presence of an other/observer; here

the reader is in collusion with the narrator in recognizing the relative merits of textual innocence and experience. The original Pélagic, like Charlécoco, is confined to story (the myth of action), while the latest one is restricted to narrative (the myth of signification).

The allusions to Homer are also fairly straightforward. References to the double odyssey of "l'Acadie du Nord" and "l'Acadie du Sud," like that of Pélagic and Broussard, captains on land and on sea, emphasize general similarities and specific differences in order to confer legitimacy upon the Acadian inheritance without deprecating the parodied text. The connection between Pélagic and Longfellow's heroine, however, is more complex and more central than the foregoing; it comes closer to what Hutcheon terms parodic satire, marked by a contesting rather than a respectful or playful (neutral) ethos.¹⁹ According to Renate Usmiani, virtually all of Maillet's plays create anti-types of Evangéline,²⁰ and the author has repeatedly indicated that such a reversal also takes place in the novel:

Pour moi, les femmes de *Pélagic-la-Charrette* sont justement plus près de ce qu'a été l'Acadienne que la fameuse Evangéline de Longfellow. J'ai donc pris une petite revanche sur cette Evangéline qu'on a toujours trouvée plutôt mièvre. Il y a un paragraphe dans "Fanie" qui explique tout ça: "La voilà, votre véritable Evangéline! une courageuse, astucieuse gueuleuse, mère de onze garçons. Lâchez-là au milieu d'un poème, et elle saura bien en faire une épopée. Une épopée étoffée non plus de vierges-symboles et de femmes éternelles, mais de tante Zélica, de maraine Maude, de Mariaagélas, de Fanie."²¹

As early as 1971, when Maillet seems to have been at work on a new play combining the eventual approaches to *Evangéline Deusse* and *Pélagic-la-Charrette*, she articulated her concept of the relation between Longfellow and Acadian writing:

Ma prochaine pièce . . . tentera de faire la *parodie historique* [emphasis mine] d'Evangéline première, l'héroïne de Longfellow. Cette nouvelle Evangéline qui se présentera comme la seule authentique femme acadienne offrira à son homologue le contraste amusant d'une femme d'un certain âge, mère de dix-sept enfants, à l'allure d'une Mère Courage ou d'une Dulle Griet beaucoup plus que la virginale héroïne figée sur un certain socle. Et c'est cette nouvelle Evangéline qui, supplantant l'autre, devra faire face à l'armée anglaise, à la Déportation et à l'Histoire. . . . C'est un genre de pièce qui tentera de forcer le temps, l'Histoire et le théâtre à se démêler dans les lois nouvelles.²²

Longfellow is not easily exorcised, however, and Maillet's feminist discourse, embodied in a matriarchal story and matrilinear narrative structure, pays its grudging respects to the old man. Even the redoubtable Pélagic-la-Gribouille joins the narrator in silencing the "conteurs-chroniqueurs de la mauvaise lignée" (26) who would query the heroine's intentions in admitting certain passengers to her cart. The reader might doubt the narrator's claim that Pélagic "ne pouvait

pas se prêter, dans les circonstances, à une telle gymnastique de mauvaises intentions" (27), but it cannot be denied that if the cart shelters the midwife Céline because she possesses no other family, it must accommodate the patriarch Bélonie for the same reasons. We are clearly confronted with what Hutcheon, in her chapter on Bakhtin, terms "the paradox of parody" when dealing with the question of origins and Longfellow as fictive father.

Maillet's solution, if any solution to such a paradox can be found, lies in the substitution of Rabelais for Longfellow in her quest for origins. As her "true" father, he emerges in the personification of Acadian legend in the form of the ship which Broussard has reappropriated from the English and named the Grand' Goule in a personal attempt to rescue history. The importance of Rabelais to *Pélagie* is manifold. First, Maillet's reading of his books and her Ph.D. dissertation on their direct links with Acadian speech and folk culture²³ prepared her for the eventual benign imitation which Hutcheon locates at the centre of parody. The novel's many allusions to the *Gargantua*, combined with the generation of new giants' tales, are a "riposte" to the foreign vision and language of Longfellow, who cannot help but be belittled in the process. As we have noted, Diagram II associates Bélonie with death and the past, Broussard with rebirth; in the end it is Broussard who saves Bélonie by restoring to him his true heir. Yet it would not do to establish too close a liaison between Bélonie and Longfellow; rather, Broussard and his crew embody and emphasize by contrast that Rabelaisian/Acadian "joie-de-vivre," resilience and generous capacity for lying which contribute their share to survival and the success of the epic:

Car telle restera jusqu'au bout la différence entre les deux plus grands conteurs de l'Acadie du retour: alors que Bélonie, durant près de cent ans, devait transmettre fidèlement à son lignage un répertoire de contes et légendes sorti du temps des Grandes Pluies, Pierre à Pitre, le Fou du peuple, allait verser dans ce répertoire des versions, variantes, improvisations, élucubrations de son cru qu'il est bien malaisé aujourd'hui de distinguer de l'authentique ancien. (100)

If Longfellow dramatized the Deportation, together Bélonie and Pierre address "l'Acadie du retour" — the former preserves the facts of the return, the latter provides the artful touches which transform it from tragedy to epic romance.

The inventiveness and occasional foolhardiness of Broussard and his crew bring us to our second major point: beyond specific debts to Rabelais, *Pélagie* is marked by a more general use of and dependence on the carnivalesque. The narrator, in the first of many such comments, poses the following key rhetorical question about the nature of the enterprise: "Les Basques étaient-ils en quête d'un pays ou d'une promenade par les terres d'Amérique entre une fête et un carnaval?" (68). It would seem that the very episodes which confer interest upon the action are interludes that as entertainment threaten to imperil as well as to prolong the quest. Thus "la Gribouille" would dearly love to relive the Charleston escape/

party interlude, described by the primary narrator as “une nuit de carnaval en prison” (81) but is repeatedly forced back to the main story line: “la seule histoire qui compte, dans tout ça, c’est celle de la charrette qui ramenait un peuple à son pays” (100-01).

Yet the pauses which punctuate the journey are an integral part of the story; like the tale of the white whale with which Bélonie entertains the carts, the Baltimore striptease and the celebrations surrounding Madeleine’s wedding serve more than just a decorative purpose. The cart only stops to accommodate life, whether in the form of the birth of Virginie Cormier or the arrival of new pilgrims from the bayous. Speaking of the women in her fiction, Maillet has stated that “si Longfellow avait dressé l’une de ces femmes en face des troupes anglaises, je ne dis pas qu’il aurait sauvé l’Acadie de l’exil, mais il aurait donné au Grand Dérangement un certain ton de vérité qui nous l’aurait rendu plus réel et, qui sait? moins tragique.”²⁴ Carnival thus marks the difference between the perspectives of Longfellow and of Maillet on the response of Acadians to official history. Although the love of Pélagie and Broussard, like that between Evangeline and Gabriel, is denied permanence, the narrator uses their first meeting to emphasize that Acadians recognize each other through the quality of their *laughter* (90). Speaking of Rabelais as both scientist and humanist, Maillet approves of his philosophy that if you can’t cure the patient, you can make him laugh long enough to forget/accept his ills.²⁵ Such is the function of carnivalesque interludes during the pilgrimage, and of Rabelaisian allusions “during” the narration, as my two final examples will try to make clear.

BAKHTIN VIEWS CARNIVAL as the popular or literary expression of laughter which parodies or inverts official culture, which flaunts the religious and political rules of the waking, everyday world. It is marked by ritual spectacles, comic verbal compositions, billingsgate, and an absence of distinctions between actor and spectator. For him, carnival is a second, festive life, based on laughter:

... as opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truths and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchies, rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of the time, the feast of becoming, change and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and complete.²⁶

In the struggle for survival, the carts do not stop for law, convention, or propriety, whether finding food for orphans or husbands for widows, although they continue to hold dear their traditions and to preserve folk wisdom. Thus the Bourgeois’ chest (a parody of the ark of the covenant), the Basques’ violin, and the

Allains' crucifix paradoxically emerge as emblems of identity and symbols of what must, despite sentimental attachments, be abandoned in order for the journey to continue and the quest to succeed. Speaking of grotesque realism, Bakhtin reminds us that "degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one," and that by "breaking up false seriousness, false historic pathos, [Rabelais] prepared the soil for a new seriousness and for a new historic pathos."²⁷

Madeleine's wedding and the celebrations, poetic and bodily, which accompany it, set against the violent backdrop of the American revolution, illustrate Maillet's attitude to carnival as the expression of temporary liberation and a form of change, becoming, and renewal. In the "unfortunate" absence of priests and patriarchs following the deportation, the women must evolve new traditions to replace the old ways "before the fall":

Sa fille Madeleine n'avait point connu les moeurs anciennes d'avant le Dérangement. La plupart des chefs de familles avaient péri dans la tourmente, emportant au fond des bois ou des mers leur bâton d'autorité reçu au paradis terrestre. Les femmes avaient dû par la suite se dresser seules face à l'ennemi et à l'adversité, et ramasser elles-mêmes le sceptre de chef de famille. Madeleine en avait été témoin, enfant posthume de son père et de ses aïeux. Pélagie pouvait compter sur sa fille pour continuer sa lignée. (241-42)

In the absence of the Basques' violin, Céline invents the "reel dit de la boiteuse," and although "toutes les mélodies ne sont pas sorties de la lyre d'Orphée," the primary narrator claims that this wedding alone must have enriched the oral tradition with half of its refrains and a quarter of its "ravestans" (247). Maillet's characterizations and choice of incidents thus serve at once to reproduce and to deconstruct Acadian folklore; the fictive fabrication of origins for such folklore is joined by pointed alterations and inversions of established custom. This example illustrates what Hutcheon means by "the authorized transgression of norms": parody cannot help but posit the order which it transgresses. At the same time, Madeleine's wedding also underlines the difference between Rabelaisian and modern parody; Maillet is much closer to the former than to the existential art examined in Hutcheon's study of postmodernism:

We must stress, however, that the carnival is far distant from the negative and formal parody of modern times. Folk humour denies, but it revives and renews at the same time. Base negation is completely alien to folk culture.²⁸

Maillet's unique perspective as an Acadian and a woman enables her to narrow the gap between Rabelaisian carnivalesque and postmodern parody; the myth of the fortunate fall acquires new meaning and poetic resonance in her iconoclastic treatment of "le grand dérangement."

The novel's multiplication of amorous encounters, both legitimate and determined by circumstance, includes Céline's with the fool-poet, Jeanne Girouard's

with her brother-in-law, Jean's with his Indian princess, and of course Pélagie's with Broussard as well as Madeleine's wedding. They all serve to contrast with the tragic tale of Gabriel and Evangeline; clearly the official order superseded for Maillet by Rabelais is the static Acadia/Arcadia pastoral vision "immortalized" by Longfellow. Maillet does not object to the poem itself so much as to the institutionalization of Longfellow's vision by a conservatively nationalistic clerical élite out of touch with the people and their traditions:

Mais, entendons-nous bien, le but de l'élite qui propose une nouvelle idéologie faite d'un mélange d'assomption, de tricolore étoilé, de loyalisme envers la langue, la religion et la terre des aïeux, idéologie que nous qualifierions d'évangélisme, si nous osions, n'a rien à voir avec la conservation des véritables traditions populaires d'Acadie.²⁹

It is through art, that is to say through the politics of parody, that this "evangelism" can best be exploded: the spokesman's loyalty to the Acadian flag, language, and religion is replaced, for Maillet, by an allegiance to the Rabelaisian trinity of "conte, roman, épopée."³⁰

Two passages from the novel emphasize the relation between writing and freedom mentioned in my introduction: Ti-Jean Fourteen's quest for the three magic words that will allow him to marry and to live happily ever after; and Captain Beausoleil's second, exaggerated account of his ship's miraculous rebirth and rechristening. The first involves Bélonie's tale of the white whale transformed, on the eve of the storyteller's death, into that of the sleeping giantess. At first this never-ending tale seems to be the literal embodiment of Bakhtin's "unfinished and open body (dying, bringing forth and being born) . . . not separated from the world by clearly defined boundaries."³¹ When the Acadian everyman Jean Leblanc ("John Smith") half-emerges from the bowels of his ancestor clutching the three magic words which constitute the legendary buried treasure of his clan, he joins his latest creator Bélonie in partaking of the grotesque body which, according to Bakhtin, swallows the world and is swallowed by the world.³² Maillet's contribution consists of the emphasis on language as the jewel buried in the dungheap: culture and identity emerge from the rediscovery of the word and its elusive, un/limited powers of renewal.

Just as the secretion of language in the grotesque body's nether regions mockingly celebrates Acadian dialects at the expense of codified French, Captain Beausoleil's involvement in the "Charleston Whiskey Carnival," explicitly contrasted with the Boston Tea Party, elevates Acadian history at the expense of American experiments and the high seriousness of their chroniclers. As Broussard repeats to the carts the tale he told the crew of his ship's twin, an English vessel taken over by American rebels, he simultaneously defers to and deflates his American host's exploits. Foreign ears are opened and Broussard's tongue unfrozen by the contraband Irish whiskey; his English gradually improves during the course of

his tale about how the Pembroke/Grand' Goule came to speak only French. This process of translation invertedly mirrors the story itself, in which his crew is frozen alive when chased to northern climes by talking whales, only to return to life a quarter of a century later upon drifting south. When a melting hail of French words finally assaults the decks, we are once more confronted with a carnivalesque celebration that blurs distinctions between subject and object, signifier and signified, story and narrative.

The reader joins an ever-expanding audience composed of the Virginian's crew, the caravan of carts, and the Acadians seated around the hearth a century later. Even in Philip Stratford's English translation,³³ a version that the text seems to anticipate, we run the risk of becoming Acadian under the influence. The text's seduction of the reader, followed by a rude awakening from the illusion of freely flowing speech, is in this instance accompanied by one of several literal explosions. The tower of Babel vies with a keg of gunpowder in a verbal revolution or artifice of fireworks:

La réserve de whisky d'Irlande fit un tel effet sur l'équipage de la Grand' Goule, que bientôt l'arsenal de Charleston se mit à résonner de mots sortis de tous les pays jalonnant l'Atlantique. On était en pleine Pentecôte. Ou à mardi gras. Un véritable carnaval des mers qui vidait les tonneaux et striait le ciel de feux d'artifice.

... Un feu trop proche des poudres, à vrai dire: une partie de l'arsenal sauta.

On a accusé à tort la Grand' Goule: elle n'avait fait que fêter ses retrouvailles avec le temps des mortels. (203-04)

The return to the land of the living, correctly translated by Stratford as "the land of *mortal* men,"³⁴ is signalled by the breaking of a very long silence. "Frozen words" suggest the sterile canonization of Acadian life by Longfellow; the melting torrent of words in Broussard's tale and in the telling of it suggests not a return to pure primordial speech so much as the birth of Acadian writing and the acknowledgement of its debt to Rabelais' *Gargantua* as well as to the popular tradition. Maillet's repeated emphasis upon narrative, carnival, and parody adds poignancy to her text, because these are not techniques so much as conscious strategies for denying the ravages of time in the eternal struggle between the phantom cart and the Cart of Life.

NOTES

¹ Antonine Maillet, *Pélagie-la-Charrette* (Ottawa: Leméac, 1979), pp. 9, 84. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition.

² Linda Hutcheon, "Literary Borrowing . . . and Stealing: Plagiarism, Sources, Influences, and Intertexts," *English Studies in Canada*, 12, 2 (June 1986), 231, 234, 236-37.

³ *Ibid.*

- ⁴ Antonine Maillet, "Mon Pays c'est un conte," *Etudes françaises*, 12, 1-2 (April 1976), 79-83.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*; see also Donald Smith, "L'Acadie, pays de la ruse et du conte: entrevue avec Antonine Maillet," *Lettres québécoises*, 19 (Fall 1980), 45-53, reprinted in his *Voices of Deliverance: Interviews with Acadian and Quebec Writers*, trans. Larry Shouldice (Toronto: Anansi, 1986).
- ⁶ Allusions to biblical, Homeric, and Rabelaisian tales are fairly obvious. "Mon pays, c'est un conte" is one of several sources which list the *Gilgamesh*, *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, and *Don Quixote* as influential epics, and Rabelais as "mon maitre," p. 81. The importance of Longfellow's *Evangeline* to Maillet's text is documented and discussed below; in "Antonine Maillet: un entrevue de Jean Sarrazin," *Forces*, 44 (1978), 30, the author reveals that she has also read *Moby Dick* in English, and Bélonie's tale of the white whale may owe as much to Melville as to Rabelais, parodically speaking. The author's repeated references to affinities with Ferron suggest that she may also have had in mind a benign parody of his rather nightmarish allegorical novel *La Charrette* (1968).
- ⁷ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Boston: The M.I.T. Press, 1968), pp. 5, 187-88, 352, 422.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 470-71.
- ⁹ See note 2 above.
- ¹⁰ Marjorie A. Fitzpatrick, "Antonine Maillet: the Search for a Narrative Voice," *Journal of Popular Culture*, 15, 3 (Winter 1981) and especially Kathryn Crecelius, "L'Histoire et son double dans *Pélagie-la-Charrette*," *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 6, 2 (1981).
- ¹¹ René LeBlanc, "Structures et techniques du récit," *Derrière la charrette de Pélagie: lecture analytique du roman d'Antonine Maillet "Pélagie-la-Charrette"* (Church Point, N.S.: Presses de l'Université Saint-Anne, 1984), pp. 15-16.
- ¹² Crecelius, p. 211.
- ¹³ James Quinlan, "'Pélagie-la-Charrette': Spoken History in the Lyrical Novel," *Revue de l'Université Saint-Anne* (1984-85), p. 29.
- ¹⁴ Craig Tapping, "Witnessing the Lies of History: Archeologies of Truth in George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin* and Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*."
- ¹⁵ Naim Kattan, *Le Désir et le pouvoir: essai* (Montreal: Editions Hurtubise HMH, 1983).
- ¹⁶ "Antonine Maillet: un entrevue de Jean Sarrazin," p. 34.
- ¹⁷ Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: the Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (New York: Methuen, 1985), p. 116.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 5, 55.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 62-63.
- ²⁰ Renate Usmiani, "Recycling an Archetype: the anti-Evangelines," *Canadian Theatre Review*, 46 (Spring 1986).
- ²¹ Smith, p. 50.
- ²² Antonine Maillet, "Témoignages sur le théâtre québécois," *Archives des lettres canadiennes*, 4 (Montreal: Fides, 1976), 812.
- ²³ Antonine Maillet, *Rabelais et les traditions populaires en Acadie* (Quebec: Presses de l'Université Laval, 1971).

- ²⁴ Smith, p. 50.
²⁵ *Rabelais*, p. 22.
²⁶ Bakhtin, pp. 8-10.
²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 439.
²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 11.
²⁹ *Rabelais*, p. 13.
³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 21.
³¹ Bakhtin, pp. 26-27.
³² *Ibid.*, p. 317.
³³ Philip Stratford, trans., *Pélagie* (Toronto: General Publishing, 1983).
³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 142. Stratford's translation is both literal and lyrical; within the limits of translation, I recommend it highly to readers who experience difficulty with Maillet's Acadian French.

ZONE

Erin Mouré

The freezing zone.
Topical cartography.
The chicken's neck, thawed & peeled to pinkness,
broken off, stuck in the cavity where the lungs have been ruined,
those soft organs with their wiring & bubbles,
softer than the words "I love you."

O small chicken with your window into the body, into which
my hand.
The ribs touched by, my fingers. Your aureole
I adopt, I am adopting.
Your skin a covering not like
our skin, but so torn & wet & pale
that when we say "skin" & touch it, we think of nothing, least of all
ourselves.

The cells of grief by which we know you.
The cells of pleasure when we place you on our tongue.
The same, finally.
Topical.
What separates us from the not-us, from the air.