

# FICTION, HISTORIOGRAPHY, AND MYTH

*Jacques Godbout's "Les Têtes à Papineau"  
and Rudy Wiebe's "The Scorched-Wood  
People"*

Marie Vautier

JACQUES GODBOUT AND RUDY WIEBE address the basic question of the nature of literary and historical reality in *Les têtes à Papineau* and *The Scorched-Wood People*. Both texts explode the concept of a "commonly experienced, objectively existing world of history" by their narrator's comments upon — and challenge to — the very notion of past reality.<sup>1</sup> The textual recreation of important historical events permits the narrators to develop the concepts of narratorial control, historical instability, and the fictional mythologizing of the past. Louis O. Mink argues that a certain malaise in the writing of history today originates in a largely unexamined conflict between an implicit presupposition we hold and a contrary explicit belief. Our presupposition is a "vision du monde" shaped by Universal History, a concept which has "disappeared from the discourse of ideas" but which still influences our treatment of history. Universal History posits that the past is to be discovered, not constructed. Difficulties arise, however, in our contradictory belief that "the formal structure of a narrative is constructed rather than discovered."

According to the common sense of our age, history and fiction are distinct: history claims to be a "true representation" of "past actuality," whereas fiction does not. Mink argues that the concept of Universal History, although dismantled by Romanticism, has not been completely rejected: we still assume that there is only *one* past. This past, however, is not an untold story of "what actually happened" which the historian discovers. *We* determine the significance of the past; it can be made intelligible only as the subject of stories we tell. Narrative history and narrative fiction therefore move closer together. Yet, as Mink notes: "If the distinction were to disappear, fiction and history would both collapse back into myth and be indistinguishable from it as from each other. And though myth serves as both fiction and history for those who have not learned to discriminate, we cannot forget what we have learned."<sup>2</sup>

This concern that fiction and history might collapse back into myth is my central subject. In a literary work which has as its referent an historical event, one asks: "where does history stop and fiction start in this text? Is there — can there be — a demarcation line between the two?" Linda Hutcheon has coined the term "historiographic metafiction" to describe such work, which raises not only the question of the verifiability of the historical events recounted in the text, but also the question of the writing of history as a creative act of the imagination, parallel to the writing of fiction.<sup>3</sup> Northrop Frye underlines the problem presented by historiography because of its relation to the construction of narrative:

We may raise the question in passing whether it is really possible to write history diachronically, except in special forms like that of Pepy's *Diary*. It seems more probable that every historian has to stand outside the history he is recording and take a synchronic view of it. The implication is that a history is at once 'true' and 'untrue' because these statements are being selected and arranged in a form that is no longer purely sequential. 'Myth' is often vulgarly used to mean a false statement, or mirage of ideology: this is because every narrative conveys to a reader both the assertion that this event happened and that it could not have happened in precisely that way and in that identical context.<sup>4</sup>

Many postmodernist texts examine the relationship of truth to narrative. Godbout and Wiebe's novels, however, illustrate particularly well current ontological questionings of history, fiction and myth. In Wiebe's work, an omnipresent, first-person narrator, the Métis poet and song-writer Pierre Falcon, recounts the life of Louis Riel and the rise and fall of his New Nation. Godbout's novel is a political allegory which comments upon the state of affairs in Quebec at the moment of the 1980 referendum on sovereignty-association. Bicephalic Charles and François Papineau are the main characters and the first-person plural narrators of the text. Unlike Riel and Falcon, they are *not* historically authentic personages. Indeed, they are rather improbable creatures: Charles and François are the names of two heads joined at the neck and sharing a single body. Like Siamese twins with independent minds, emotions, and discourses, they live an increasingly frustrating life, bound together physically and yet partial to different aspirations. The political implications of their complicated existence are foregrounded throughout the text.

Godbout, in a recent interview, said that "Toute entreprise d'écriture est une entreprise pour masquer, transformer, transmuier les choses, et non pas pour les dire comme elles sont . . . [Ecrire, c'est] briser la chronologie, briser la représentation."<sup>5</sup> Writing for Godbout, then, is an act of transformation which is not based on historical chronology or direct representation. Even the exterior presentation of his text as artifact overtly thematizes its metafictional and historiographic concerns. On the back cover, Charles-François Papineau is presented to the perspective reader as a "real live person," complete with definite birthdate

(1955), birthplace (Montreal) and age (25). The effect of reality which this blurb asserts is greatly strengthened by an initial reference to the celebrated Dionne quintuplets; it then leads on, without the slightest change in tone, to the existence of Charles-François, "le seul enfant à deux têtes qui ait survécu si longtemps."<sup>6</sup> This phraseology implies that there have been other two-headed children, as there have been other sets of quintuplets. Instead of touting the *novel* as being worth its price, the entire publicity blurb, written by Godbout, emphasizes verisimilitude, the *life* of "les têtes": "Leur vie est un roman plein de contradictions et de surprises."

The title of the reproduction on the front cover, "Le disque rouge à la poursuite de l'alouette," indicates the political slant of this allegory, the alouette being the traditional mythological symbol of things French-Canadian. Political overtones are also indicated by the play on words in the title. "Papineau" recalls Louis-Joseph Papineau, the leader of the "Patriotes" who fled to the United States after the failure of the 1837 rebellions. Godbout also plays with the standard expression "Faut pas se prendre pour la tête à Papineau!" — loosely translated as "Don't think you're more intelligent than you really are!" As Alain Piette has recently pointed out, the historical Papineau has undergone a process of mythification which makes of him a crystallized heroic figure of the past. Godbout's title, however, totally subverts the raw material he started out with: the cliché concerning Papineau. The use of the plural form centres the reader's attention on the collectivity rather than on the individual Papineau. And the negative form has disappeared — are we then to think that the collectivity *is* intelligent?<sup>7</sup>

The chapter headings are unusual in that they use the ordinal and not the cardinal number system: "premièrement, deuxièmement." The adverbial form is used until the last chapter, which is entitled "enfin." Such a denomination recalls the "étapisme" project, whereby the Parti québécois hoped that by proceeding by stages (étapes) they would render the referendum vote less traumatic. The epigraph ("Chaque enfant recommence à zéro l'histoire de l'humanité") is an indication that in this text a certain importance will be allotted to history, and to individual and collective destinies.<sup>8</sup> The exterior presentation of the work, then, strongly suggests that its main characters, bizarre and fabulous as they may be, have a historical reality, that they occupy a given time and place. The presentation also indicates that the text will discuss the historical, political, and mythological discourses of Quebec.

**R**UDY WIEBE SHARES GODBOUT'S view of writing as an act of transformation; the outer presentations of his novels also address questions of historical verisimilitude and metafictionality. Wiebe has stated that the research

he did for *The Temptations of Big Bear* enabled him to write *The Scorched-Wood People* at a faster pace, as he had already acquired a knowledge of the historical background of the period.<sup>9</sup> This shared research is significant because of the prefatory address in *Big Bear*:

No name of any person, place or thing, insofar as names are still discoverable, in this novel has been invented. Despite that, and despite the historicity of dates and events, all characters in this *meditation upon the past* are the products of a *particular imagination*; their resemblance and relation, therefore, to living or once living persons is to be resisted.<sup>10</sup>

This passage indicates Wiebe's attitude to story-telling, or, more appropriately, to story-making. Facts, for Wiebe, are the raw material from which he shapes his story. In an interview with Eli Mandel, he sets out his ideas on the relationship of fact to fiction:

Well, you need the facts so you can make something out of them. To discover facts or to discover details of geography are things that are done . . . But, then, when it's done, it's finished with. The act is in the past. The fact is always in the past, but a fiction is what you make of it. And you have to have a certain amount of facts to make a fiction out of them. Something that will last.<sup>11</sup>

Wiebe's concern for the longevity of his fictional productions may stem from his desire to give their history back to the people. As does Godbout, Wiebe heaps scorn upon inadequate education systems that neglect to inform people of their historical particularity:

For in forcing me to discover the past of my place on my own as an adult, my public school inadvertently roused an anger in me . . . *All* people have history. The stories we tell of our past are by no means merely words: they are meaning and life to us as *people*, as a *particular* people; the stories are there, and if we do not know of them we are simply, like animals, memory ignorant, and the less are we people.<sup>12</sup>

The double concern for making stories and for using words to give meaning to a particular people is linguistically underlined by Wiebe's choice of title. This "meditation" upon the Métis insists upon their collective individuality: they are the scorched-wood *people* — a translation of the original French name for the Métis, "les bois-brûlés." The linguistic issue and the potentially political issue are thus stressed on the title-page.

The epigraph printed under the title reads:

And who has made this song?  
Who else but good Pierre Falcon.  
He made the song, and it was sung  
To mark the victory we had won;  
He made this song that very day  
So sing the glory of the Bois-brûlés.<sup>13</sup>

Although no source is given, this epigraph is in fact modelled on the last stanza of a song composed by the historical Pierre Falcon. It is interesting to compare the original French text to the English translation, and to then compare the latter to Wiebe's epigraph:

Qui en a composé la chanson  
 Pierre Falcon, poète du canton.  
 Elle a été faite et composée  
 Sur la victoire que nous avons gagnée.  
 Elle a été faite et composée  
 Chantons la gloire de tous les Bois-Brûlés.

And who composed this little song?  
 Why, the people's poet, Pierre Falcon.  
 And why did he write this little lay?  
 To sing of the victory we won this day.  
 That's why he wrote this little lay,  
 To sing of the glory of the Bois-Brûlés.<sup>14</sup>

The belittling expressions "this *little* song" and "this *little* lay" are conspicuously absent from Wiebe's epigraph. Falcon, the fictional narrator, is telling the story of his people by means of this text, and his story is anything but minor! The words "the people's poet" have also been eliminated; this, however, may be because of the proximity of the word "people" in the title. The verbs "composed," "write" and "wrote" of the translation have all been replaced by the verb "made." It is most interesting to note this systematic elimination of all verbs having to do with the act of writing in this epigraph to a metafictional text! This insistence on "making" as opposed to "writing" seems to stress the autonomous existence and power of the text. Its narrator, in retelling the known story, is making a new reality and not just recording the past. The infinitive "to sing" of the translation has been transformed into an imperative "So sing the glory," in Wiebe's epigraph. As in the original French text, the hearer (reader) is being urged to participate. This song, the written text, has the power to shape our perception of the way things were. Although — perhaps because — it is the product of a particular imagination, it can mediate between us and the past.

Wiebe's novel is divided into four parts, each with its subtitle and epigraph. The epigraph to Part One is a "quotation" from Riel: "If . . . the Canadian Government wanted to avoid the fact that I was a being at all, the whole world knows that it is not so; they cannot avoid me." This statement spells out a justification for the text's existence: although a fictional construct, it is going to underline the "reality" of Riel — readers of this work are *not* to ignore him!

The exterior "wrappings" of the two texts, then, are far from being incidental to their subject-matter. The presentation of Wiebe's novel tends to insist upon the fictionality of his work, even though much of the raw material he uses to create

his fiction exists in a historical dimension. Written documents, such as letters, memoirs and trial records, inspire the epigraphs and considerable parts of the text. The exterior of Godbout's novel, which presents a world of quasi-fabulous creatures and happenings, insists upon historical verisimilitude. The titles of both works are textual transformations of what was a linguistic entity with an historical referent. Wiebe's title, being a translation, is indicative of the nature of his text; it will be a mediation between different modes of being. Godbout's front page subverts a fixed linguistic expression and reproduces a mythological symbol, both of which have long been part of the average Quebecker's mythological heritage. His text, as we shall see, is not a mediation between different groups but an internal discussion within a closed system. The outer presentations of both texts do not respect Mink's wish that we maintain the distinction between history and fiction. There is even a hint of their collapsing backwards into myth, in the use of a mythological figure in Godbout's title and in the implication that Wiebe's text will in fact be Falcon's poetic mythification of the glorious deeds of the Bois-brulés.

While commenting upon two important historical and political events, the narrators of both novels are working *within* a given mythological system and *working out* a new mythological system. The act of myth-making is central to their texts: they self-consciously blend fiction and history to create or recreate myth. The textual flaunting of historical allusions and ahistorical illusions, however, goes one step further: the narrators present *themselves*, as well as their texts, as a mixture of fictional elements and historical personages. In this way, they challenge the reality of their own existence. At the same time, however, they stress the importance of their narratorial role and the seriousness of their textual productions. As a result, the historical and fictional worlds of the novels are inextricably bound together.

The historical Pierre Falcon died in 1876, but the fictional Pierre Falcon is not bound by time or space as we know them. He is both in his fictional world and not in it. At one point, as participant, he is singing his "silly, ironic, ribald songs"; at another, as distanced observer, he is commenting upon the life of the twentieth-century Métis. Falcon openly breaks with the objective or "neutral" narrator convention. The articulation of his society and its leader is his poetic function and the "raison d'être" of this text:

During my lifetime I was given many songs, and I have often prayed to the Good Father . . . I have prayed, give me to make this song of Riel. You gave me so many songs . . . Give me this song too . . . I prayed for that for some years, and that song of Riel was not given me until I lay on my deathbed.

Although Falcon was not given the song he prayed for during his lifetime, he is able to concretize the Métis' "greatest vision" from his dwelling-place after death. The repetition of the pronoun "this" indicates that the text we are study-

ing is Falcon's song of Riel: with these written words, he is expressing and giving permanence to a vision held by his Métis society. He is also conscious of the fact that his articulation of the way things were is a strain on credibility. "Quoting" Riel directly, he says: "I must leave Riel's words to stand in all their unmemorable bareness: their unearthly power will have to be seen in the effect they had . . . And most of all, I suppose, in their impossibility."

Falcon is primarily concerned with explicating the Métis' "vision du monde" to those outside the Métis' universe. If I consider the world of the Métis to be a closed circle, then Falcon's role as narrator may be illustrated by placing him on the circular line. As Métis, he can move within the circle; as narrator-with-a-mission, he can reach outside the circle by means of this written text and explain the Métis to the non-Métis. His repeated efforts to explain the religious cosmological concepts of the Métis underline the fact that he is addressing himself to the non-initiated, as Métis do not need to explain their commonly-held "vision du monde" to each other. Near the end of the novel, while discussing the political and religious crises of his people, Falcon sends a message to the reader about this text:

The word and understanding is very near you: you need no revelation from beyond the grave; as our Jesus said when he was on earth, if you will not believe what is already discernible on earth, then neither will you believe that which comes extraordinarily from beyond.

Falcon, the narrator of this text, and the singing poet of the Métis, is "from beyond the grave" but his words are, indeed, "near" us. His words invite us to understand what should have been discernible on earth: this text solicits our recreation of an historical past.

**I**N *Les Têtes à Papineau*, Charles and François pose a particular narratorial problem: *who* is doing the narrating? The first word of the text, "Nous," indicates that this diary will be a harmonious co-production, as does the following passage: "Donc cet ouvrage ne se prétend pas une biographie officielle. Il s'agit tout simplement du *journal* de notre évolution . . . Et c'est pourquoi nous l'assumerons . . . au nom des deux têtes. C'est un récit biographique."

However, as early as the fifth paragraph of the novel, the "nous" breaks down into third-person narration. Although the "nous" remains the main narratorial voice, this break-down occurs frequently; as a result, the heads are perceived as being different persons. Piette has suggested that the "nous" does not designate only the "personnages-narrateurs," but also "toute la collectivité québécoise." The name "Charles François" strongly evokes "canadien-français." François

represents the traditional group which looks nostalgically towards the past; Charles is oriented towards the future.<sup>15</sup> Godbout here demonstrates his awareness of the changing socio-economic scene: Charles is the embodiment of the typical Quebec businessman — the “P.D.G.” of the “P.M.E.” — whose existence is still largely ignored outside Quebec.

The narrator’s statements and attitude imply that their coexistence is rooted in reality, but even their father, who is partly responsible for their creation, underlines the improbability of their existence; should he write “le nouveau-né” or “les nouveau-nés”? Constant reference to the worlds of make-believe suggests that the heads may be fictional products. Their birth is presented as the opening night of a play; their lives are qualified as a continual “freak show” and they themselves determine their entire existence to be superficial: “Nous savions planer à la surface des idées, des gens et des choses. . . Spirituels et superficiels.” They do not even trust their father’s version of their conception, as he has a reporter’s temperament: that is to say, he has a tendency to produce new realities. The creation of new or alternative realities is a recurrent theme in this work.

The heads discuss their relationship as co-authors in the fourth chapter. Charles proposes that each write his separate version of the adventure; otherwise, the reader will never know who they truly are. It is eventually decided that the primary function of the text is to communicate their evolution to each other. If the world of the text is again a closed circle, then the narratorial role of the heads may be illustrated by placing them within the circular line. Readers may observe the inside communication from outside the circle by reading this text, but the purpose of this “récit bi-graphique” is basically an explanation of themselves to themselves. On the political level, the implication is that, at this critical moment of their history, Quebecers have to discuss the referendum among themselves. This text is an internal discourse.

Before the operation (which will destroy their individuality, but “normalize” them), the heads are placed in quarantine and hooked up to a computer. Their internal communication can continue, as they each have access to a keyboard. But as the surgeon Northridge has programmed the computer to distinguish between single and plural pronouns (“moi” — “nous”), all their sentences do not show up on the two screens. Metafictionally, of course, this episode underlines Charles-François’ existence as a linguistic construct. According to François, the operation is already in progress, as their written discourse has been divided. This text becomes progressively more difficult to write, as the number of interferences increases. Each head has to approve of the text; their failure to agree on the written word can bring their narration to a halt: “Les discours se croisent, se bousculent, s’entrechoquent.” Their knowledge that neither will write the final chapter of the journal contributes to the slowing down of their production. Perhaps the final letter is the only possible solution to the impasse that was described



at the beginning of the diary: "Nous sommes, pour ainsi dire, idéologiquement séparés. C'est pourquoi ce livre ne peut être un effort de raccordement. Une médiation." If we stay within the limits of the narrators' text, the journal will not be published, as it remains an incomplete document.<sup>16</sup>

The narrators, while aware of the reader outside the closed circle of their text, do not facilitate her/his comprehension of their discourse. They only introduce themselves after five pages of text. They can, and do, keep parts of their communication from the reader: "(Nous avons convenu de ne pas transcrire ici le jeu de mots qui vient de traverser l'esprit de François . . . )." Their concern about the operation is disguised behind a façade of light-hearted humour. A passage near the end of the novel, however, echoes Falcon's message to the reader about understanding the text:

Mais les gens croyaient que [Charles] blaguait. Les gens s'imaginent *toujours* que nous blaguons. Parce que nous avons deux têtes, parce que nous utilisons deux discours; ils croient que nous jouons avec les mots pour des effets de langue. Comment pourraient-ils prendre un monstre au sérieux? Quand sauront-ils que nous disons *toujours* la vérité? Quand il sera trop tard . . . ?

Is this not an invitation — if not a plea — to take the narrators seriously? Are we not being told that this text, while playful and therefore regarded as escapist, is, in fact, extremely responsible in socio-cultural terms?<sup>17</sup> The constant fluctuation between playfulness and seriousness in *Les têtes* is comparable to Pierre Falcon's passage through different time-frames coupled with his personal style of recounting past events. Both narrators deliberately focus on the process of story-telling *and* on the fact that they are subverting the reality of their own narratorial existence. The reader is openly reminded that both the narrators and their texts have a provisional existence. In these works, historical and literary instability reigns.

**F**ALCON'S CONSCIOUSNESS of his text as a fictional construct is illustrated by the intermingling of "song" and "[written] word." The Métis poet's *songs* articulated the power of his people, but in this novel his singing voice has become a written text. With this textual product Falcon does what Riel had hoped to do with his writings, that is to say, he gives a voice to the Métis people. Falcon, however, is wary of written words. For Riel, "the words [wrote] themselves," and he used them "to give his unwritten people a place on paper before the frozen earth closed them away one by one and no one would hear them. . . ." But for Falcon, these words of Riel are "words to be used against him, for every written word called to judgement." Falcon had wanted to shape the Métis' vision into song while still on earth, as words, for him, are frustratingly insufficient when compared to song. By constantly playing off "voice" and "song" against "words"

and “paper” Falcon foregrounds his awareness of the limitations of the written word. He would rather that we heard his song, as he is not at all sure of his control over potentially dangerous written words: “The letter was lying there, and letters are dangerous. . . . The words crouch black on pale paper, unchangeable and deadly.” The irony, of course, is that Falcon’s song comes to us and lives on as a written, black-on-white text. The strong use of black/white/grey imagery throughout the novel insists upon this irony. Falcon here expresses a frustration common to many metafictional writers: written words are fixed, rigid, and limited in their ability to communicate fully to the reader. By contrasting “song” with “written word” and by using imagery which recalls the act of writing, Falcon underlines his knowledge of the limitations of the textual product. By means of the written word — and in spite of it — he transmits his dissatisfaction with writing while admitting to his need of it in order to communicate the story of his people.

The difficulty of translation insists upon this text as a construct. The Métis, as we know, spoke French: this text makes us read, in English, about their inability to speak English. This point is driven home by Michel Dumas’ incomprehension when he and other Métis eavesdrop upon Colonel Wolseley’s plans to attack them: “‘What’s that English,’ Michel whispered, ‘what?’” The problem of translation is related to one of the major themes of the novel: the conflict produced when different linguistic and religious groups with different worldviews come into contact with one another. Falcon’s awkward use of the English language underlines, on a linguistic level, the frustrations he experiences in his efforts to explicate the Métis’ “*vision du monde*.” For instance, his account of the “hunter’s court” which judges Thomas Scott points out that he is killed, not for political reasons, but because of the effect his blasphemy had on the Métis. Linguistic and cultural incomprehension is evident in the following passage, where Falcon, long afterwards, tries to explain the event to an English-Canadian:

‘It is the cursing,’ [Goulet] said . . . ‘The few French words aren’t so bad, but to understand English, it’s so . . . at home I soak my head in cold water, in snow, but the blasphemy . . .’

‘Shoot a man for telling you to go to hell!’ MacLead burst out.

‘If you really know . . .’ but how do you explain the eternal annihilation of your soul to someone who doesn’t want to know he has one?

By foregrounding the problems of translation, the text thematizes Falcon’s struggles to “translate” the history of his people. Contrary to traditional historiographic practice, this text does not seek to deny or to efface the narratorial voice: the reader is made aware that this song is *Falcon’s* particular meditation upon the past.

*Les têtes à Papineau* is also an extended metafictional construct; here, much emphasis is placed on the distortion of reality. The reader is made aware of the

narrators' predilection for the construction of alternative worlds. Speaking of Charles, François says: "il aime lui aussi inventer des univers inconnus." The heads acknowledge that they can — and do — change their own perception of things: "Nous adaptions notre discours à la sauce littéraire ou politique suivant les lieux." Many characters are creative transformers of reality: performers, actors, writers, journalists, and computer programmers. Even the computer is a manipulator of characters, and this makes of it a producer of an alternative reality.

Patricia Waugh has noted that "the question of the ontological status of fictional characters is ultimately inseparable from that of the question of the referentiality of fictional language." In metafictional works proper names are often flaunted to focus attention on the fact that the objects named exist in a world which is entirely a verbal construct. The names used in this novel point out that "what is referred to has been created . . . through a 'naming' process."<sup>18</sup> Characters change names in order to present another image of themselves. Dippydou, the "rock western" singer, is "de son vrai nom Colette Tremblay." In this allegorical novel, the names can also have political meaning. For instance, the heads' grandmother, Britty, symbolizes the ailing British empire, and "la race des Papineau" represents Quebec.

As is the case with Pierre Falcon, the narrators overtly thematize their awareness of the act of writing by including other texts within their own: letters-to-the-editor, their father's newspaper articles, selections of their biography and the texts transcribed on their computer terminals. Again, intertextual production is stressed by numerous references to producers of literary texts: Kafka, Rimbaud, Cendrars, Eluard, Prévert. This text also foregrounds its existence as a fictional product by insisting on its linguistic condition. For instance, the repetition of the last word of a sentence provokes a break in the rhythm and forces the reader to become aware of the game of writing. The same effect is produced when the narrators interrupt their discourse to underline the effect of a sound: "embryonnaire, an-bri-yo-nère." The playful exchange of consonants in the following sentence not only arouses an awareness of word-games but also pokes fun at nationalistic values: "'C'est tout de même ainsi,' répondit François, 'que nous avons conservé nos traditions, notre langue, notre foi, nos chansons et nos chromosomes. Chrysostome!'" This work, then, flaunts its conditions of textuality; its narrators make us aware of the fictional construction of their text and of the textual creation of alternative worlds.

*Les têtes à Papineau* is an allegorical comment upon an historical event and upon the socio-political evolution of Quebec which has led it to this important moment. The narrators, by constantly playing off the "historical" world against alternative worlds, confuse our perception of all worlds. They suggest "that history itself is a multiplicity of 'alternative worlds,' as fictional as, but other than,

the [world of the novel].” The heads do this by using various narrative techniques, such as the insertion of “real historical events [and] personages” into a fictional context.<sup>19</sup> For instance, reference is made to the Shah of Iran, Duplessis, and the Dionne quintuplets and to events such as the Battle of the Plains of Abraham and the New York City black-out. At times, distance between the worlds is reduced to a minimum: the centrefold of the 1956 *Almanach du Peuple* is said to portray, on the left-hand side, the Dionne quintuplets in the arms of their father, and on the right, Charles-François in the arms of Alain-Auguste!

The heads also perform linguistic operations on well-known historical quotations, thereby reinforcing the idea of history as a construct. Henri Bourassa’s axiom “la langue est gardienne de la foi” is altered by the narrators’ verbal play. Northridge’s mother, a French-Canadian postulant from St-Boniface, becomes pregnant to protest against the disappearance of her race. Her baby is adopted by an Anglo-Catholic family in Winnipeg, and the head’s ironic, political comment is “Déjà, au Manitoba, la foi n’était plus gardienne de la langue!”

The heads’ narration of their own evolution also underlines the fact that history is a construct. Theirs is not presented as a chronological sequence, but as a continual alternation between past and present. Personal significance is frequently given to historical dates, such as the beginning of the quiet revolution. For the heads, writing this text is no different from constructing their history: this text is their history and they are a grammatical construction within it! When Charles stops the narration to read over what has been recorded so far, the construction of this history — and by extension, any history — is foregrounded. The final chapter of their history remains unwritten; like us, they exist in the present and reconstruct the past from fragments; the future is out of their control. At the end of the novel, they seem to lose control over their own existence: they are told they belong to the public, to the nation and to science. By linking their history to that of the collectivity throughout the text, the heads stress that history itself is a “personal reconstruction” and, perhaps, “the ultimate fiction we are all living.”<sup>20</sup>

I  
N *The Scorched-Wood People*, Falcon also flaunts his text as an historical construct. He occasionally interrupts his own narrative to refer to the historiographic act: “I know of no historian who has commented on this to say the least strange legal distinction that men who shot and killed Canadian soldiers only *intended* to wage war while Riel . . . had actually waged war.” Commentaries of this sort point out Falcon’s knowledge of other historical interpretations of the Riel rebellions. They also stress that his Métis “vision du monde” differs from the traditional view of history. As with the translation technique, the use of Falcon as a biased narrator underlines the idea that the true story of the

past is necessarily a construct. Different “true stories” are made by different narrators. The presentation of the end of the story in the first paragraph of the novel subverts the traditional historiographic process, which tends to explain events in chronological order leading to a climactic ending. The frequent use of flash-forwards has the same effect. By not giving the sources for the documents he uses, by treating them as just another aid in the story-telling process, Falcon both disorients the reader’s perception of objective historiography and makes her/him aware that the past is being constructed. Perhaps this song of Falcon’s, this text we are reading, is just as authentic a document as those it has incorporated into itself!

Falcon denigrates the mythological system of the average Canadian. In this book, John A. MacDonald is a scheming hypocrite and the Mounties hardly ever get their man! And though Falcon says he cannot sing of the “machinations of eastern politicians” the following passage certainly retells events in a non-traditional way:

... no Opposition would now dare vote against the last gigantic loan which could complete the financing of the Canadian Pacific Railway for the massive benefit of Canada from Sea to Sea and, quite incidentally, for the benefit of CPR shareholders. Riel had created the catastrophe, an outbreak worthy for Conservative purposes of elevation to rebellion, as the Prime Minister would explain carefully to the Governor General as soon as the fighting was over.

While ridiculing the “great figures” of Canadian history, Falcon also indicates that he is self-consciously constructing an alternative historical world. His demolition of the myths of MacDonald, Cartier and the Mounties creates a vacuum which permits a new historical and mythological perspective. Blending fiction and history, Falcon sets up a mythological system which centres on Louis Riel.

Northrop Frye, discussing myth as the matrix of literature, posits that “literature seems to begin in a corpus of stories.” Some of these stories are classified as folk tales; others take root in a specific society and “begin to exist in time.” The stories of this second group become mythical stories: they are similar to “other stories all over the world,” but they “contain traditional names and specific affinities to religion and legendary history that establish them within a single society.” According to Frye, myth differs from history in that it is not bound to a sequence of events but is a “presentation of human history in a participating form.” I would argue that Pierre Falcon’s main concern as a narrator is to reshape the history of Louis Riel: this “song” is a place where the mythical story of Riel and his New Nation is being retold. Falcon’s repeated efforts to explain the Métis’ cosmology underline his desire to have his listener/reader participate in this recreation of history, this production of myth. With his “song,” the narrator attempts to overturn the historical process which condemns Riel as a moccasin-clad madman. Falcon bases the development of the myth of the Métis

upon what Frye calls the decisive “Biblical mythology” of our tradition. He does this by constantly drawing parallels between the Métis and the Israelites, and between Riel and Jesus Christ.<sup>21</sup>

Paradoxically, setting up Riel as a god-fugre depends upon the dismantling of the system already in place, the system of the organized Church. Claiming that Rome has fallen, Riel tells his people that God has called to him with these words: “Hear me! My son, why do you fight against me? Have I not called you, Louis David Riel? To the great mission of the Métis people? Rise! Call your people to that mission with which I will bless the earth!” Strong Biblical imagery dominates this novel. For instance, Falcon refers to the central issue of translation while using the Book of Daniel as an intertext: “but now Riel was speaking a phrase in English, a phrase in French as if he read his terrifying words burned into the log wall.” The twelve members of the Exovedate proclaim Riel to be a “prophet in the service of Jesus Christ,” but the archetypal imagery of the novel suggests that he *is* Jesus Christ. Falcon insists upon his “beginningless and endless immortality.” Riel moves out of time and out of body into his vision-world. Two passages in particular convey the Riel/Christ metaphor: the baptism of the Methodist Will Jackson as Henry Joseph Jaxon, new son of the New Nation, and the scene of the sacramental meal. Riel asks God’s blessing on the “bannock” (unleavened bread) and milk which he and his men eat after they have made a “religious decision”; the men feel that this is “beyond comprehension, revelation!” Riel is both priest and god in this ceremony of the New Nation. The re-shaping of sacraments — doing now what Christ did then — gives a mythic dimension to Riel’s actions; it annihilates the difference between Christ’s time and his time. In the same way, Falcon’s “song” of Riel’s passage through time gives a mythic dimension to his story, by annihilating the distinction between the historical past and the present of this text.

Falcon uses cyclical structure and imagery to underline this annihilation of time. That Riel’s life on earth was just a part of the cyclical pattern of events is summed up in Gabriel’s statement: “You think like a white . . . You can’t help it, that’s okay, but you think Riel is finished? He said a hundred years is just a spoke in the wheel of eternity. We’ll remember. A hundred years and whites still won’t know what to do with him.” After the death sentence has been passed on him, Riel begins to comprehend; his mission, he says, is to bring about practical results, “and even if it takes two hundred years to achieve it, what does that matter? God’s time is not ours.” Riel must hang to be a saint; in dying he gives life to the story of his people. The cyclical structure of the novel ties this Christ-like sacrifice to eternity. Falcon produces a “revolutionary view of history” by portraying Riel as a god whose “action [leads] to reconciliation.”<sup>22</sup> The Métis, who have known one hundred years of solitude since Riel’s death, are not eternally condemned to it. The last sentence of *The Scorched-Wood People* holds out hope: “O God I

pray again, let not our people be confounded. Give them that faith again." By blending fiction and history, Wiebe has ensured that the myth of the Métis and their leader will remain present and alive in the reader's meditation upon the past.

**I**N *Les têtes*, CHARLES and François also self-consciously display their *making* of history. They too place strong emphasis on mythologies and on the making of myth. By flaunting classical and other mythological allusions, they underline the metafictional aspect of their text. Against these various mythological backdrops, the heads narcissistically concentrate on their own role as myth-makers. This mixture of mythologies informs and deforms their history and ours. It reminds us that we all create our own mythologies, by seeking to historicize our existence in space and time. The heads insist upon their uniqueness and the fact that they are at the centre of the universe; "Les Têtes à Papineau" (capital "T"! ) excel at everything, arriving first in their studies, their work and their social life. The entire world is aware of their celebrated existence: Marie-Lalonde's computer programme is a "merveilleux scrap-book électronique" which records the rise of their reputation.

Their apprehension of the unknown, however, provokes a return to "insécurité infantile." In an effort to dissipate their fear of the operation and of the future, the narrators turn to the mythological past in search of ontological stability. Their playful efforts to insert themselves into the various mythological systems foreground their insecurity. As in Wiebe's work, Christian mythology is frequently used as an intertext. The narrators set up parallels between their life and the life of Jesus Christ. Their birth, for instance, is a mystery and a miracle, and the final meeting of the family is described as a Last Supper. The importance accorded to the American West also indicates the narrators' explorations of alternative mythological systems.

Quebec folk traditions serve as a major intertextual tool. By inserting fragments of Quebec folk songs into their discourse, and by constantly altering well-known historical and political slogans, the heads create a tension between the fabulous world of two-headed beings and the "real" world, the one with an historical setting. This technique brings alternative worlds into contact. It also underlines the fact that this text is reserved to those who have the same socio-historical world-view as the one referred to by all these textual games. One example of this play with myth-making and mythology is the use made of the derogatory term "frog." Charles and François repeatedly use the frog image as a political metaphor, which permits them to comment upon the uniqueness of their situation and upon their internal disagreement. By incorporating a pejorative term normally

used by anglophones, the heads are readjusting their own mythology, re-situating themselves as myth-makers and assuming the controlling power over their own mythological system. The blurring of boundaries between the various worlds in this novel allows the narrators to confuse our perceptions of myth, mythology, history, fiction and reality, and to call for a new way of looking at the world.

Mink's concern about fiction and history collapsing back into myth is, therefore, addressed by the narrators of both *The Scorched-Wood People* and *Les têtes à Papineau*. In Wiebe's novel, Pierre Falcon uses the act of storytelling as a means of mythologizing history. He openly strives to set up a new mythological system which will ensure the continual presence of Louis Riel and of his New Nation in today's world. In Godbout, the narrators' interests lie more in manipulating myth so as to blur the boundaries between historical events and fictional elements. The "brouillage" created by the narrators' mixture of fiction and reality, myth and history, forces the reader continually to readjust to shifting worlds. This play results in a tension which provokes questions about the reality of the world outside the text. By overtly displaying themselves and their texts as metafictional and historical constructs, the narrators of both novels foreground the concept that past reality is a construct and ultimately point to the fictional mythologizing of our history.

Northrop Frye writes:

Literature is conscious mythology; as society develops, its mythical stories become structural principles of storytelling... In a fully mature literary tradition the writer enters into a structure of traditional stories and images. He often has the feeling, and says so, that he is not actively shaping his material at all, but is rather a place where a verbal structure is taking its own shape.<sup>23</sup>

I would argue that in the two "verbal structures" examined in this paper, a process of mythologizing is indeed taking place. I would further argue that because of their metafictionality these two mythologizing "verbal structures" are linked to the world outside the text: they provoke readers to question their conceptions of "history" and "fiction." Precisely because of their auto-referentiality and their particular use of historical referents, both *Les têtes à Papineau* and *The Scorched-Wood People* foreground Edward Said's idea that: "Texts are worldly... they are part of the social world, human life, and of course, the historical moments in which they are located and interpreted."<sup>24</sup> Although Mink sees the blurring of fiction and history as a step backwards in the learning process, these two historiographic metafictional illustrations illustrate that this process can indeed be a new way of knowing, a new way of mediating upon the past.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: the Theory and Practice of Self-conscious Fiction* (London and New York: Methuen, 1984), p. 6.



- <sup>2</sup> Louis O. Mink, "Narrative Form as a Cognitive Instrument," in *The Writing of History: Literary Form and Historical Understanding*, ed. Robert H. Canary and Henry Kozicki (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1978), pp. 129-49.
- <sup>3</sup> Linda Hutcheon, "A Poetics of Postmodernism?" *Diacritics: A Review of Contemporary Criticism*, 13 (Winter 1983), 40-42.
- <sup>4</sup> Northrop Frye, "Myth as the Matrix of Literature," *The Georgia Review*, 38 (Fall 1984), p. 473. According to Frye, one *can* step outside one's history and view it objectively and synchronically. This is contrary to Michel Foucault's idea, as expressed by Linda Hutcheon: "We can never describe our own archive, our own discursive history, because we speak from within it." See Linda Hutcheon, "Canadian Historiographic Metafiction," *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 30 (Winter 1984-85), 232.
- <sup>5</sup> "Jacques Godbout et la transformation de la réalité, une entrevue de Donald Smith," *Lettres québécoises*, 25 (printemps 1982), 54.
- <sup>6</sup> Jacques Godbout, *Les têtes à Papineau* (Paris: Les Editions du Seuil, 1981). Further references are to this edition.
- <sup>7</sup> Alain Piette, "Les langues à Papineau: comment le texte national se fait littérature," *Voix et Images*, 9 (printemps 1984), 123.
- <sup>8</sup> This epigraph is not listed in any dictionary of quotations. Is this "A.D.N." "l'acide désoxyribonucléique" discovered by J. Watson and K. Crick, which concerns the relationship between chromosomes, genes, and hereditary malformations? Is Godbout metafictionally displaying his tendencies to incorporate scientific and political issues into his fiction?
- <sup>9</sup> Brian Bergman, "Rudy Wiebe: Storymaker of the Prairies," in *A Voice in the Land: Essays by and about Rudy Wiebe*, ed. W. J. Keith (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1981), p. 166.
- <sup>10</sup> Rudy Wiebe, *The Temptations of Big Bear* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1973). The emphasis is mine. This passage is found only in the hard-cover edition; I thank Carla Visser for bringing it to my attention.
- <sup>11</sup> Eli Mandel and Rudy Wiebe, "Where the Voice Comes From," in *Voice*, ed. W. J. Keith, p. 152.
- <sup>12</sup> Rudy Wiebe, "On the Trail of Big Bear," in *Voice*, ed. W. J. Keith, p. 134.
- <sup>13</sup> Rudy Wiebe, *The Scorched-Wood People* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1977). Further references are to this edition.
- <sup>14</sup> Brian Davis, ed., *The Poetry of the Canadian People 1720-1920*, vol. 1 (Toronto: N.C. Press, 1976), pp. 246-47.
- <sup>15</sup> Piette, and Patricia Smart, ["L'espace de nos fictions: quelques réflexions sur nos deux cultures," *Voix et Images*, 10.1 (automne 1984)] associate this double name with the English-French conflict. Both Piette and Smart conclude that the heads are, in Smart's words "plutôt les côtés 'canadien' et 'français' de la psyché québécoise . . ."
- <sup>16</sup> This text, which comes to an end without "finishing," recalls the final pages of Hubert Aquin's *Prochain épisode* (Ottawa: Le Cercle du livre de France, 1965).
- <sup>17</sup> See Waugh, p. 78.
- <sup>18</sup> See Waugh, pp. 93-94.
- <sup>19</sup> See Waugh, pp. 104-05.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>21</sup> Frye, *Myth*, pp. 469-74.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 474.

<sup>23</sup> Northrop Frye, "Conclusion" to *Literary History of Canada: Canadian Literature in English*, gen. ed. Carl F. Klinck (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1965), p. 233.

<sup>24</sup> Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1983), p. 4.

## THE APPRENTICESHIP

*Gary Geddes*

Once, as a boy, I peered  
into the moist abyss of the well  
and saw my face a small dot  
in a circle of light no larger  
than my mother's hand-mirror.  
I tried, having no wings, words,  
letting them penetrate, by degrees,  
the receiving ground, this  
holiest of holies, and my voice  
deepened as they fell.

I learned to prime the pump  
in summer, or melt the ice  
with applications of warmth  
in dead of winter,  
to gather the necessary darkness up  
into my bucket and, galvanized,  
stagger from the dank well,  
drunken, brimming.