

# SPEAKING WITH AUTHORITY

## *The theatre of Marco Micone*

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**T**HE EXISTENCE OF A MINORITY or ethnic voice at the heart of Québécois literature is rather new. Until recently, the fundamental cleft between “nous autres” et “les autres” seemed to preclude the possibility of defining the Quebec population and its consciousness in other than dualist terms. Quebec literature, like Quebec scholarly writing, saw only French versus English and hardly recognized the specific existence of the ethnic communities.

If for a very long time the only immigrant culture in Quebec to have produced a significant body of literature was the Jewish community (and it was written of course in English), this situation is now changing. The Italian and Haitian communities especially, but other groups as well, are beginning to produce works in French which define themselves explicitly within the context of Quebec literature and Quebec society. This process of self-definition accompanies a sudden spurt of interest on the part of Quebec academics (principally sociologists) in the “third constituency” of Quebec society.<sup>1</sup> Such a new perspective will perhaps mark a shift in the rôle which the “other” communities of Quebec have traditionally been asked to play politically: to neutralize their aligning themselves strictly with one or the other major group in the province.<sup>2</sup> For many, the increasing visibility and prominence of Quebec’s cultural communities promises an end to what has become a sterile stand-off between majority (Francophone) and minority (Anglophone) populations.

Italian writers in Quebec are currently the most visible and active community to emerge during this new phase of cultural readjustment. The recent publication of an anthology of Italian writing in French, *Quêtes* (Guernica, 1983), and the dynamic trans-cultural review *Vice-Versa* (a trilingual cultural magazine edited by Italian writers) are indicators of the significant activity of the Italo-québécois writer in the cultural life of Quebec.

The work of Marco Micone, playwright and essayist, is of particular interest in this context because of its very explicit social and political focus. Though the representational and somewhat didactic nature of Micone’s work sets it apart from much of the writing of other Italo-québécois writers (most of whom stay

away from explicit references to social and national questions), Micone shares the concern for language which characterizes much contemporary Québécois writing.<sup>3</sup> Micone, however, formulates his concern for language within a political universe, a dramatic world informed at all levels by power relationships. Language becomes an instrument and a manifestation of authority. To master language (and this involves mastering particular languages) is to be able to impose one's interpretation of reality.

Micone has written two plays, *Gens du Silence* (translated into English as *Voiceless People*) and *Addolorata*.<sup>4</sup> Both have been successfully produced for Montreal audiences and these plays — along with several essays on immigrant culture — have made Micone the unofficial spokesperson on “minority issues” for the Quebec writer's community. *Voiceless People* is an ambitious fresco which attempts to embrace through the experience of one family the social, political, and psychological realities of immigration. Through the story of Antonio (his “expulsion” from his native village, his lonely arrival, his difficult readjustment with his wife and children, his exploitation as a labourer, his steadfast reverence for Authority) and his subsequent conflicts with his wife and daughter, the spectator is given a mass of ideas and opinions about the phenomenon of immigration. The symbolic characters, stylized acting, humour and other Brechtian devices provoke a “distancing effect” and introduce mythological elements into the play. Micone's second play *Addolorata* also uses such devices, but the play focuses particularly on the second-generation immigrants and especially on the relationship between father and daughter, husband and wife. The Authorities which were referred to explicitly in *Voiceless People* (the Church, the Politicians, the Boss) are represented in *Addolorata* mainly through their impact on the power which exercises itself in family relationships.

Though Micone's plays in many ways invite the kind of sociological criticism that ethnic literature has always received, there emerges through the problematic of power and expression a specific nexus of issues. Here the “psychological landscape of ethnic culture” sketched by Eli Mandel receives its linguistic underpinnings.<sup>5</sup> Certainly one of the principal characteristics of ethnic writing is the sense of linguistic relativity which Daphne Marlatt describes as characteristic of the world of the immigrant or outsider: “The sensation of having your world turned upside down or inverted also, I think, leads to a sense of the relativity of both language and reality, as much as it leads to a curiosity about other people's realities. It leads to an interest in and curiosity about language, a sense of how language shapes the reality you live in, an understanding of how language is both idiosyncratic (private) and shared (public), and the essential duplicity of language, its capacity to mean several things at once, its figurative and transformational powers.”<sup>6</sup> In Micone's plays, this kind of sensitivity is linked on the one hand to the status of specific languages (French, English, Italian) within Quebec

society and on the other hand with the question of the authority of personal expression. Who has the right to speak and what authority will their words have? Before discussing the dynamics of language and authority in Micone's works, we will situate these same dynamics as they relate to the author's choice of a language of expression.

THE NOTION OF A NATURAL LANGUAGE of expression, dictated only by overwhelming strength of feeling, is a vestige of the Romantic illusion of immediacy. All writers must choose from among the various vernaculars or literary idioms which are offered by their mother tongue. Some writers (members of minority groups or of "minor literatures") will, however, opt for a natural language which is not their own, often because this second language will give them access to a greater readership. Multilingualism has always been treated as a deviation by institutions of criticism, generally formed along national lines. The few odd deviants who have transgressed national barriers and written in second languages (Nabokov, Beckett, Conrad) are treated as singular linguistic acrobats, capable of feats of prowess totally inaccessible to ordinary writers.

Writers themselves have been important in reinforcing the notion that there is an exclusive allegiance to the mother tongue. Psychoanalysis, psycho- and sociolinguistics have investigated and documented the extremely emotional and exclusive bond between the speaker and his native tongue. But the idea that there is necessarily a mystical union between the writer and a single, native language is clearly false. We have only to consider the huge gap which often existed between the literary language and the vernacular in many cultures. Certain historical eras have sometimes demanded multilingualism for writers: Leonard Forster suggests that during the Renaissance, for example, multilingualism for writers was the rule rather than the exception.<sup>7</sup> Some subjects, for instance, were treated only in specific languages (for example, love poems in Italian).

In cases where there is the possibility of choice, the use of a particular language for literary expression constitutes what, in the vocabulary of speech-art theory, we could call "appropriateness conditions" for authorship.<sup>8</sup> An author's work will fall into a particular category of discursive practice in part because of the very language (as well of course as the level of language) which has been chosen. One could conceive of the case of a work which conforms in all other ways to the norms of the literary canon of the time, but which would be excluded from the critical arena because of the inappropriateness of its language.

The case of Yiddish in nineteenth-century Europe offers a paradigm for a study of appropriateness conditions relating to the "authorship" of literature.<sup>9</sup> The Jewish writer, generally trilingual, had to choose between Hebrew (the

sacred language of the Return to Zion), Yiddish (the "impure jargon" associated with the values of a secular society), and the language of the non-Jewish community. The choice of the writer carried implications which were not only esthetic but also political and social. Before 1830 the term "Yiddish writer" was in fact impossible: Yiddish was considered an unworthy tongue for serious writing, improper for literature. By the beginning of the twentieth century, however, Yiddish was the language of a dynamic and modernist literature.

The situation of the Italo-qubécois writer in Quebec offers some similarities to that of the nineteenth-century Jewish writer. For the Italo-Québécois, Italian is the language of an only partially familiar country and culture. English is the language of a continent, a powerful and omnipresent trading language. And French? the language of a people whose relationship to the outsider has yet to be defined. In choosing one of these three languages for literary expression, the writer makes a choice which carries social implications.

In the prefaces to his plays, in the various essays he has written, and in his plays themselves, Micone has stated the reasons which led him to choose French as his language of expression.<sup>10</sup> His reasons were cultural and political. "We must replace the culture of silence by immigrant culture so that the peasant within us stands tall, so that the immigrant within us remembers, and so that the Québécois within us comes to life. . . . You can write what you wish, but only if you write in French will we have a chance of being understood and respected for what we are. It's now or never."<sup>11</sup> It is certain that Micone's plays would not have had the same considerable impact or cultural message had they been written in English.

Micone was then confronted with an unusual problem, however. How to represent the French spoken by Italians when there is no existing, general model to imitate? Micone explains in an interview (*Vice-Versa*, février 1984) that after rejecting the idea of a standard, international French and having decided that a popular idiom would not necessarily ridicule his characters, he opted for a hybrid language. This language, he suggests, represents the street language which Italians will speak in about twenty years from now in Quebec. It is a popular language and includes, for example, words like "Sacrimente," the Italian version of the popular Quebec swear-word "Sacrament."

The somewhat artificially popular, sometimes stylized, nature of language in Micone's plays is one of the elements which sets up a central tension: the conflict between their nature as realistic artifacts (representations of a pre-existing reality) and their nature as interpretation (the play through its very organization imposes on the spectators the "correct" analysis of its contents). By questioning the authority of interpretation of its characters, *Voicelless People* and *Addolorata* lead us to question the authority of the playwright himself. Micone's plays unfold through a dialectic of interpretations, opinion confronting opinion like the clang of crossed swords. Underlying this conflict we sense the playwright's desire to

master a complex reality, to use the differing attitudes of the characters to construct a large and complete understanding of Italian immigration in Quebec society. In this endeavour, the language of the playwright — like the words of his characters — is an act whose authority will be “felicitous” because the appropriate conditions have been met.

THE TITLE OF MICONE’S FIRST PLAY, *Gens du Silence*, translated as *Voiceless People*, at first seems eminently paradoxical: all of the characters in Micone’s plays talk a lot. They talk too much in fact, and their very volubility becomes suspect as the play proceeds. Too many words can begin to sound like silence when we realize that words can be used not only to convey information or to express emotion but also to indicate self-importance — or to mask the fear of nothingness.

But words are also interpretations of reality and the talking matches in Micone’s plays are jousts, conflicting versions of reality which confront one another in mutual incomprehension. There are basically three voices in these discussions: that of the dominant male (Antonio, Giovanni) who represents the traditional, conservative view; that of the subordinate but lucid female (Anna, Nancy, Addolorata) perhaps on her way to emancipation; that of the symbolic character, Zio in *Voiceless People* and the announcer in *Addolorata*. The male-female voices confront one another in dialectic; the symbolic characters introduce a third voice, a synthesis giving the play larger dimensions. We see language operating as an instrument of power within the family (who speaks, what authority do his/her words have) and also as an indicator of social status. Because languages in Quebec are identified with different social constituencies, we are given an often humorous version of the immigrant’s perception of these associations.

For Antonio, English is the language of the bosses and therefore the language which inspires respect. Antonio insists therefore that his children go to school in English. “Ya, the English not only have all the right cards, they know how to play them too. That’s why they win. It’s important to understand that. Not for us, it’s too late for us . . . But for the children. They have to learn how to win. That’s why we have to send them to English school.” Nancy will retort at the end of the play, however: “It’s not the language that makes the boss.”

Antonio’s son Mario, who was born in Quebec and who did indeed go to English school, speaks half-French and half-English and copiously punctuates the resulting mixture with “fuck.” Antonio is proud that Mario can speak three languages, but Mario’s unsure grip on language is a reflection of his inability to obtain social advancement (he will go to work in the same factory as his father). He is consoled by the marvellous roar of his Trans-Am. Lolita, the young fiancée

in *Addolorata*, sees only advantages in multilingualism. Her “four languages” are a precious asset for “marriageability” and the good life: “With my four languages I can watch the soap operas in English, read the T.V. Hebdo in French and the photo-novellas in Italian, and sing Guantanamo.”

Satire here reveals the link between a profusion of languages and cultural poverty. Possessing language is not only manipulating a code correctly (and in many cases of multilingualism, especially among immigrants, this level of mastery is often not attained). Language and culture are the means through which individuals interpret their past and their present. The incapacity to master language becomes, in *Voicless People*, the inability to understand one’s reality. Nancy: “I teach adolescents who have Italian names and whose only culture is that of silence. Silence on the peasant origins of their parents. Silence on the reasons which led their parents to emigrate. Silence on the manipulations of which they are victims. Silence on the country in which they live and on the reasons for this silence.”

The counterpart to these silences are the certainties of Antonio, the convictions he uses to protect himself from nothingness. Antonio is for authority, against the separatists, for his wife staying at home, for the English, for the Church and its processions. Antonio believes that French-Canadians are lazy, and that hard work must be accompanied by respect for those who command. “Here we only need strong men to defend what we have and to protect respect for authority.”

Antonio’s knowledge has been gathered through suffering and work. When his ideas are challenged, he maintains that his view of reality is the only valid one because it is supported on this foundation. Nancy articulates the relationship between authorized opinion and status when she says sarcastically: “You can understand because you’re neither young nor a woman.” Antonio has dedicated his life to the building of this edifice of conviction just as he has sacrificed himself for the acquisition of a house. This house, detested by Mario as a useless museum and by Nancy as the symbol of all the privations the children have suffered because of it, is for Antonio tangible compensation for the loss he has suffered as an immigrant. “Here I have no ancestors to protect me / Here I have no hills to surround me / For an immigrant, the house is more than a house.”

**I**N *Addolorata* JOHNNY/GIOVANNI also attempts to impose his vision of reality on his wife. Johnny and Lolita are second-generation immigrants (or they have immigrated at an early age). Johnny differs from Antonio in his more complex and radical view of immigration. This difference is economically justified in the play by the fact that Johnny has refused to work for a boss, choosing instead to run a pool room. (His clients are “educated people,” “on our

side.”) Giovanni’s critiques of capitalist economy are radical: “If emigration were a good thing, it would not have been left to poor people like us and our parents”; “In a country where the rich and the bosses lead the government by the nose, all the poor, all the workers are immigrants, even if their names are Tremblay or Smith.”

But in *Addolorata* the historical and economic explanations of the immigrant condition begin to sound like rhetoric. Giovanni does not hear Addolorata when she says that she does not want to have a boss either and that she is leaving him. Giovanni is convinced that Addolorata understands nothing. “You think that the only cause of all your unhappiness is me. . . . That’s why you want to leave me just like you left your father. Me, I think that the cause of our misery is not to be found here. Everything must change. Everything.” But Addolorata refuses the political argument and returns to the personal: “I can’t change everything, Giovanni. But I will change whatever I can.”

In Micone’s plays, then, male rhetoric is an active agent in the oppression of women. In the dialectic of power/powerlessness which characterizes the particular situation of the male immigrant (source of authority within the family, powerless outside the home) rhetoric — whether it be from the right or the left — becomes an almost concrete manifestation of selfhood. Conflicting interpretations, as presented by Nancy and by Addolorata, are quite simply unacceptable within the context of the family and the couple. Their words do not carry the necessary weight. Though Gino, Nancy’s comrade in agitation, can remain within “Chiuso” (the Italian community) to pursue his goals, Nancy cannot. She must attempt to find some place “outside” where she might perhaps find words which will be heard.

If Micone the playwright can choose from among various languages of expression the one most appropriate to his needs, his characters have little choice. Although Antonio lives the illusion of control, he shows himself to be a victim of language. Antonio remains trapped within a net of illusion which keeps him from the authenticity associated with his daughter Nancy. But is this authenticity also an illusion? Do Nancy and Addolorata have a privileged relationship to language precisely because of their very powerlessness? This indeed seems to be the dialectic presented by Micone: the language of authenticity is accessible only to those excluded from the possibilities of both power (economic power) and authority (the limited power exercised by the head of the family). Because they are “doubly immigrant,” women have no access to and no stake in the rhetoric of authority. By adopting the family as his particular area of investigation, by shattering questions of language and power into a dynamic configuration of inter-related fragments, Micone shows finally that the “immigrant question” is simply a variant on the theme of powerlessness. Here is a subject, suggests Micone, on which women speak with authority.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Both *Sociologie et sociétés* 15, no. 2 (October 1983) and *Recherches sociographiques* (February 1985) have recently brought out issues on ethnicity in Quebec. The Institut québécois de recherche sur la culture has made the question of ethnicity one of its priority areas of research and has produced an impressive number of publications over the last few years, for example: *Les juifs du Québec* (bibliographie rétrospective annotée), comp. David Rome et al. (1981); Tina Ioannou, *La communauté grecque du Québec* (1984). See also *Spirale* (décembre 1983) for a dossier on "Écriture et minorités au Québec."
- <sup>2</sup> "The only choice we've been given is to make what we are 'converge' with what they are, the better to be suffocated by the weight of the majority." Marco Micone, *Gens du Silence* (Montreal: Québec/Amérique, 1982), p. 95. The translations are mine as the English version of the play was not available at the time of writing.
- <sup>3</sup> See Fulvio Caccia's article in this issue.
- <sup>4</sup> *Gens du Silence* published in English translation as *Voiceless People*, tr. Maurizia Binda (Montreal: Guernica, 1984). *Addolorata* (Montreal: Guernica, 1984). *Addolorata* also published in part in *Quêtes* (Montreal: Guernica, 1983). "Propos d'enfants," *Dérives* nos. 17-18 (1979), pp. 20-25. "La culture immigrée," *Dérives* nos. 29-30 (1981), pp. 87-93.
- <sup>5</sup> Eli Mandel, "The Ethnic Voice in Canadian writing," *Another Time* (Press Porcepic: 1977), p. 92.
- <sup>6</sup> Daphne Marlatt, "Entering In: The immigrant imagination," *Canadian Literature* no. 100 (Spring 1984), pp. 219-23.
- <sup>7</sup> Leonard Forster, *The Poet's tongues. Multilingualism in literature* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1970).
- <sup>8</sup> For the questions of authorship and appropriateness conditions, see: Michel Foucault, "What is an author?" in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. D. F. Bouchard and S. Simon (Cornell Univ. Press, 1977); and Mary Louise Pratt, *Towards a Speech Act Theory of Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1971).
- <sup>9</sup> Régine Robin's *L'amour du yiddish: écriture et sentiment de la langue, 1830-1930* (Paris: Editions du Sorbier, 1983) is an excellent source of information on this question.
- <sup>10</sup> See note 2. It is interesting that Micone, like many new immigrants in the 1950's, was refused entry to French school. Paradoxically he learned French at McGill. One of the major consequences of Bill 101 in Quebec has been that one out of five children at French school now is of other than French-Canadian origin. Of the eighteen writers published in *Quêtes*, all but seven of the contributions were originally written in French.
- <sup>11</sup> *Gens du Silence*, pp. 94-96.