

OCTAVE CRÉMAZIE AND HIS RETURN TO MOTHER DEATH

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THERE HAS BEEN A TENDENCY to identify the poet Octave Crémazie (Quebec 1827-Le Havre 1879) with the national expression of French-speaking Canada, almost to the exclusion of other chords in his lyre.¹ Against this view, a strong protest was voiced by Séraphim Marion,² who drew his arguments from a study published by Father Valentin M. Breton in 1908. As the Rev. Breton has shown, among the 20 poems included in the *Oeuvres complètes*, edited by H. R. Casgrain in 1882, there were only six inspired exclusively by nationalist feeling. Four other poems showed no trace whatever of having been written by a Canadian in Canada, and the rest were tied to the Canadian soil only by some slight allusions.

Marion attempted, of course, to strike a balance between the two extreme ideas of a Crémazie singing of nothing but patriotism and a Crémazie singing of anything but patriotism. The critic called to mind the early poems not included in the *Oeuvres complètes*, in which Crémazie had given utterance to a conventional if somewhat artless feeling for his native land. But Marion was not quite sure that the Rev. Breton's critical analysis had sufficed to modify the current notion about Crémazie. He wrote:

Les légendes ont toujours eu la vie dure. Malgré cette mise au point, la critique persistera longtemps encore, en certains quartiers, du moins, à voir uniquement, en Crémazie, le chantre officiel du patriotisme . . . La postérité, encline à l'émondage et à la simplification, n'a retenu, en somme, de l'oeuvre crémazienne, que la silhouette épique et magnifiquement campée du *Vieux soldat*.³

Patriotic poets are somewhat out of fashion nowadays but that is no reason to be afraid of the genre (after all, the greatest of patriotic poets were Virgil and Shakespeare); as in everything, the question is not so much what you do, but how you do it. Yet it would be a pity if an excessively simplified image of Crémazie were to be the one to prevail. Even if he is not a poet of the highest rank, there are things to be found in him far more profound and complex than those that go into the making of a mere "chantre officiel du patriotisme."

BEFORE WE ATTEMPT a further exploration of Crémazie's poetry, it will not be amiss to offer some comments on the kind of patriotism that is his stock-in-trade. In the first place, it is mostly of the military and *dulce et decorum* description. He delights in swords and flags and names of battles — any battles — and names of heroes — any heroes. The following lines may be read as typical:

N'est-ce pas qu'il est bon d'entendre dans les airs
Retentir, comme un chant d'une immense épopée,
Les accents du clairon et ces grands coups d'épée
Qui brillent à nos yeux ainsi que des éclairs?
Guerriers des temps anciens, Paladins magnifiques,
Héros éblouissants des poèmes épiques
Dont les recits charmaient nos rêves de quinze ans. . . .⁴

To him any battle is heroic and epic, a joy to the combatants and a treasured memory and inspiration to their offspring, whether they are French or English, Russian or Turk or Italian. The poet himself, for all his war-mongering, does not seem to have been a man with a bellicose cast of mind. He is not in a class with the soldier-poets who could and did die on the battlefield — a Sidney or Körner or Garcilaso. There was just one occasion when Crémazie found himself close to actual war, during the siege of Paris in 1870-71, and he did not find the experience to his taste. As to the possibility of volunteering to fight for his beloved France (he was of military age and never missed a chance of referring to *nous Français*), the idea apparently never crossed his mind. His war enthusiasm was rather like that of boys who get intoxicated by a military band marching past; and in this respect our poet, as a poet, did not outgrow his fifteenth year. As a man, he came to know better, as shown by his reflections on the slaughter of the French-German war:

La guerre est une chose horrible. Quand on ne fait que lire l'histoire des conquérants, on se laisse facilement prendre au miroitement de la gloire militaire. Mais quand on a vu de près les ravages et les désastres causés par la guerre, on se demande avec effroi quel nombre incalculable de misères sans nom, de douleurs inénarrables, de morts épouvantables, il faut à un conquérant pour tresser ce qu'on est convenu d'appeler la couronne du vainqueur.⁵

There is another odd thing about his patriotism. It is strange, to my mind at least, that for a man who wants to be the singer of national consciousness, Crémazie is continually hankering after another and distant country, namely, France. He was, of course, a French Canadian and France was the mother country of French Canada, but all that was long ago and much water had flowed in the Saint Lawrence since. The river did not stop its course when Lévis departed, nor did life cease in the cities, villages, and farmsteads on its banks. The break of the

political connection with France had emphasized, if anything, that the native land of Canadians lay right there under their feet and not on the other side of the ocean. It is significant, however, that Crémazie introduces the name of France 57 times in his poems, while the name of Canada appears only 11 times (including two periphrases: "la jeune France," "la Nouvelle France").

Like most writers, Crémazie did not arrive fully equipped on the literary scene but had to undergo an evolution, not only in acquiring the technical skills of verse-making but also in developing his views and his themes. The very first of his poems ("Premier jour de l'an 1849"), while open to criticism on several scores, is noticeable as an expression of an undiluted national feeling. Here occur the remarkable lines:

Salut! ô Canada! salut! ô ma patrie!
 Plus heureux que le monde à qui tu dois la vie,
 Tu possèdes déjà l'heureuse liberté
 Que veut en vain saisir son bras ensanglanté.⁶

Here he speaks of his native country with pride and appreciation, exalts its contemporary achievements and — most interestingly — contrasts those achievements with the vain and frenzied attempts being then made by "le monde à qui tu dois la vie," that is to say, by France. This is perhaps the coldest and most matter-of-fact reference to France which can be found in Crémazie, still young and unsophisticated, and maybe for that very reason imbued with a strong Canadian national feeling. His regard being fixed on his native soil and the current problems confronting his own people, he did not seem to care much about "en révolutions la France si féconde."

Soon after that (1851), he undertook the first of his travels to Europe, visited France and Italy, and he underwent a profound change. This change may perhaps be best understood as an instance of a more general phenomenon, which was typical of the relations between the American continent and Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century. Many young persons from the new American countries made their way to Europe and were considerably shaken by the encounter with an older, deeper, and richer civilization. The contrast was too great with the milieu in their home countries, which at the time had little more to offer than profuse promises of a bright future. This was true of all the American countries, not excluding the United States, which might be more dynamic than the others but was still wearing out the first shoes of its development.⁷ It is no exaggeration to say that political independence in the American countries had not meant by any means the end of cultural colonialism. Some of those fascinated visitors to Europe tried to absorb as much as they could for the benefit of the people back home; others were so enthralled that they remained and sought to get accepted on an equal footing in the cultural and even aristocratic European circles. In France they were often rewarded with the nickname *rastacouères*.

Crémazie could not help, either, being impressed by what he saw in France and Italy and the vast difference from the modest surroundings in which he had grown up. At any rate, it is at this point that he embraces the France-topic, which coloured so much of his subsequent verse. As Odette Condemine writes:

A la suite de son récent voyage, le sentiment de la patrie se transforme chez lui en une émotion plus complexe et plus intense; désormais, son attachement au sol du Canada se double d'un amour profond de la France.⁸

But it is also at this point that Crémazie's patriotic poetry begins to strike the unprepared reader as peculiar. A truly national Quebec poet, one feels, should sing of Canada, and not of what for all practical purposes had become a foreign country. Who could imagine a national poet of the United States singing the glories of Great Britain and expecting the return of the British flag? It is true that Crémazie frequently refers to "nos pères" and "nos aïeux," but the true sense of these expressions is seen in the lines:

Descendant des héros qui donnèrent leur vie
Pour graver sur nos bords le nom de leur patrie.⁹

The opposition of *our* soil and *their* homeland makes it clear that these persons, referred to as "pères," "aïeux," and "héros," are merely embodiments of the presence of France on Canadian ground. The word-play between *nos* and *leur* is a frequent feature of Crémazie's poetry.

There is in Crémazie a clear distinction between passive and active elements, between nature and history. Canada for him is nature, the usual designation for which is "nos bords." He may not be a very close observer of this nature, but it is the only guise in which Canada appears in his poetry: so much so that he hardly ever mentions that part of Canada which must have been the best known to him (and was excellent material for a poet epically inclined), the city of Quebec. When he refers to Quebec at all, he usually makes of it a kind of stage on which to show the cross (to frighten the Indians), and the French flag (to frighten the British). France, on the other hand, is history, is the creation of human values, a source of light from which Canada may be happy to receive a distant reflection:

O Canadiens français! comme notre âme est fière
De pouvoir dire à tous: "La France, c'est ma mère!
Sa gloire se reflète au front de son enfant."¹⁰

Furthermore, in a true national poet the song should make room for the present and also for the future, but such was not the construction Crémazie placed on his poetic exercise. After the initial period, in which he paid some attention to local current events, the present and the future of his country ceased in themselves to inspire him, and he could visualize Canada only in terms of the

French connection of old. He had not heard the Gospel word: "Let the dead bury their dead"; for he stayed with the dead and insisted on preventing their final burial. His strains were a lament for the past and an impossible expectation of reversal of the times. For the present there was little praise and less encouragement:

Et puis il comparait, en voyant ce rivage,
Où la gloire souvant couronna son courage,
Le bonheur d'autrefois aux malheurs d'aujourd'hui.¹¹

This is a fine antithesis but a distortion of history. Quebec did not lack problems in 1850 but nobody could pretend that, in matters of peace, security, freedom, and prosperity, it had been better off in 1750. On the contrary, here was offered an excellent subject for a national poet. He could sing not only the wonder of *la survivance* but also the rise of the French-Canadian people to new heights of achievement. Crémazie, however, seemed to be unaware of the new Canada growing around him. Immersed in a mist of romantic unreality, he kept dreaming of old battles and old glories and addressing his fervent outbursts of patriotism not to Quebec but to France. Condemine, the modern editor of his works, has gone to the heart of the matter when she calls Crémazie "le barde des gloires françaises en Amérique" and "le chantre des gloires françaises."¹² Séraphim Marion tried to obtain some indulgence for this trait in Crémazie:

Un fils bien né ne saurait trop aimer ses parents. Et s'il donne quelquefois de son amour filial des manifestations trop exubérantes, qui l'en blâmera?¹³

Of course nobody will blame Crémazie for this. The business of literary appreciation is not to censure the poet — especially in the choice of subject, which is the first of his artistic rights — but to understand him. And the beginning of understanding is to stop and take notice of his peculiarities.

Of all 34 poems included in the *Oeuvres* as edited by Odette Condemine there are a limited number which can be classed as reflecting the current existence of the Canada in which Crémazie lived — not epic, not heroic, not flag-waving, but simple, frugal, descriptive, or hortatory, and anyway attuned to the present. These are the poems that can be called truly national and even patriotic, as they place their emphasis on national subjects and not on foreign wars or events. This does not mean that they are wholly free from foreign matters — that would be asking too much of Crémazie — but at least he tries in them to focus on the country and the time in which he really lived.

"Le jour de l'an 1852," written at the time when he had already turned his eyes toward France, contains, however, a short but faithful description of the conditions which he could see prevailing around him:

Aux bords du Saint-Laurent, le Canada français,
Grandissant chaque jour, en honneur, en puissance,

A reconquis ses droits par sa forte vaillance,
Et domine aujourd'hui sous l'étendard anglais.¹⁴

The poet must needs add "la France ne meurt pas," but he has nonetheless drawn a proud picture of his own country pulling itself up "par sa forte vaillance."

There are several poems of a rather lyrical bent, mostly descriptive, which implicitly or explicitly concentrate their attention on Canada, to the exclusion of foreign places:

Heureux qui la connaît, plus heureux qui l'habite,
Et, ne quittant jamais pour chercher d'autres cieux
Les rives du grand fleuve où le bonheur l'invite,
Sait vivre et sait mourir où dorment ses aïeux.

Recevez un conseil sous forme de souhait.
De vivre et de mourir où vécurent vos pères
Vous faisant pour toujours un sublime devoir,
N'allez pas comme moi remplis d'une fol espoir
Perdre vos plus beaux jours aux rives étrangères.

Heureux qui, dévouant sa vie
A la gloire de te servir,
Sous ton beau ciel, ô ma patrie!
Peut dire à son dernier soupir:
O Canada, fils de la France,
Toi, qui me couvris de bienfaits,
Toi, mon amour, mon espérance,
Qui pourra t'oublier jamais?

Connaissez-vous sous le soleil
Un fleuve à nul autre pareil . . . ?¹⁵

The number includes two pretty lyrical trifles which do not sound very specifically national, yet they contain a line or two where it might be permissible to find a reflection of the Canadian landscape:

Et se mêle au murmure
Des vagues sur nos bords.

Des parfums et d'accords
Parsemant ton passage,
Tu reviens sur nos bords . . .¹⁶

On the other hand, "Fête nationale" is not so completely national as the title leads one to expect. The first two stanzas hint at rather than display the observances of St. Jean Baptiste Day in French Canada, and the last stanza loses the thread altogether, as the poet's attention wanders away to the battlefields in Northern Italy. Yet the poem contains at least one stanza in which the national feeling finds an almost unadulterated expression:

Il est sur le sol d'Amérique
 Un doux pays chéri des cieux,
 Où la nature magnifique
 Prodigue ses dons merveilleux.
 Ce sol fécondé par la France
 Qui regna sur ces bords fleuris,
 C'est notre amour, notre espérance,
 Canadiens, c'est notre pays.¹⁷

This is far from being great poetry. The expression lacks in amenity and modulation ("nature magnifique," "dons mervielleux," "bords fleuris") and the repetitions ("la France," "espérance," "amour") become tiresome; but the poet's sincerity compels respect. Here is the "chantre officiel du patriotism" at work. He does not do it very competently, but it obviously comes from the heart.

"Les Mille-Iles," intended as a description of a particular and certainly very attractive place in Canada is frankly disappointing. Instead of fixing his and our regard on the spot he wants to eulogize, the poet flies off at a tangent and embarks on a wild tour, in the course of which he enumerates the marvels of all the lands under the sun. He does come to the triumphant conclusion that the Thousand Islands is a place more beautiful than them all; and far be it from me to question the conclusion, but a less roundabout method might have been more effective. Even what he really says by way of description is not at all striking and might apply to any scenery involving trees and water. Yet this curious poem, combining the near look with the distant longing, contains one of the very few references in Crémazie's poetry to an overpowering aspect of Canadian nature — the Canadian winter — and to the not unreasonable desire of some Canadians to take a winter holiday in Florida or some other place where sunshine is not rationed:

Fuyant ces plages refroidies
 Où la neige tombe à flocons,
 Sur des rives plus attiédies
 J'irai redire mes chansons.¹⁸

A far more profound interest attaches to *Le chant des voyageurs*, perhaps the only poem by Crémazie where he shows us some Canadian men of flesh and blood — not historical ghosts — spending themselves in the hard work of taming their still wild homeland. As Condemine very justly remarks:

Les thèmes sont ceux de la vie libre et insouciantes des voyageurs canadiens, des coureurs des bois, des "cageux," la joie de l'aventure, le goût du risque, le plaisir du retour au foyer; ils sont aussi ceux de la vie humaine, le passage du temps et la mort inévitable acceptée par l'homme du peuple avec résignation et courage.¹⁹

Crémazie, for once, compels us to go with him, to share in the feelings and experiences he describes, to be thankful for a glimpse of a country which is

undoubtedly Canada as he knew it. A more human tone obtains in this poem; no allusion is made to France; we are not reminded of the poet's "aïeux"; toil is the keynote, and not war. And, most refreshingly, women and love make here one of their exceedingly rare appearances in Crémazie's poetry:

*La blonde laissée au village,
Nos mères et nos jeunes soeurs,
Qui nous attendent au rivage,
Tour à tour font battre nos cœurs.*²⁰

This is, to be sure, one of the most successful of Crémazie's poems.

A high mark must be given also to "Colonisation," the only poem which, in my opinion at least, can pass the test as a convincing expression of patriotism. It is true that "de la France la langue et le grand nom" are not absent from it, and the tone is sombre and lachrymose enough; nonetheless, the poet evinces here a real concern about his own country, about the danger of letting young people drift away for lack of opportunities at home, about the need to find money for resource development. These subjects may or may not be "poetic," but Crémazie, for once, is in earnest about something immediate and vital. In urging his people to invest in their young men and in their vast forests he is more truly patriotic than in inviting them to shed their blood, if and when required, for Mother France. Among much irrelevant matter, his message rings clear and strong:

*La forêt vous attend. Défricheurs intrépides,
La fortune naîtra de vos travaux rapides;
Dans ce rude combat soyez au premier rang.
L'avenir est à vous. Travaillez sans relâche,
Fécondez de vos bras, dans cette noble tâche,
Ce sol que vos aïeux arrosaient de leur sang.*²¹

In summing up Crémazie's role as a patriotic poet one must do justice to his insight into the nature of national consciousness. He understood, or at least felt, that the present and the future are rooted in the past, that a living past is the condition and the guarantee for the new life growing out of it. But how can the past be kept alive? Not by appealing to individual memories; most people can hardly visualize any time but their own, and very few are acquainted with their families beyond their grandparents. The past of a country is enshrined in the collective memories, in the deeds and the figures which have been the landmarks of their progress through time.²² These collective memories, as gathered by the poets and the historians, become the symbols — usually meaning more than their substance — around which they organize their expectations, hopes, and fears for the present and the future: thus supplying a vital need in a national community, for, as the Book says, "A people without vision shall perish."

Crémazie, as a poet, wanted to provide his people with such a vision of their past. He took on this burden early in his literary career, and the burden, which

suites well his youthful interests and propensities, shaped most of his poetic production. Later on, when misfortune had sharpened his outlook and new experiences had shattered many of his former illusions, he was moved to attempt poetry in a different key. The evidence shows, however, that he had, as it were, run ahead of himself: his readers, who were so fond of him as the writer of historical reminders, did not know what to make of the new strings in his lyre. His "off-key" poems were largely ignored, and Crémazie was frozen into the "chantre officiel du patriotisme." As such he maintained his place for some time in French-Canadian literature, but now, it seems, he is out of fashion. His recent editor writes:

Les Canadiens perdirent leur engouement pour les chansons patriotiques de Crémazie, lorsque, après la seconde guerre mondiale, de nouvelles poussées économiques et sociales se firent sentir dans la vieille province de Québec, et le rêve nostalgique de 1860 fut remplacé par une vision plus réaliste de l'avenir.

... dans la seconde partie du XX^e siècle, la "légende" Crémazie s'estompe. Les chansons patriotiques d'autrefois ne suscitent plus la même émotion. Une littérature nouvelle, adaptée aux besoins de la société moderne, remporte les suffrages.²³

The fact remains, however, that Crémazie cannot be discussed as a poet without taking into consideration the ample part that patriotic poems occupy in his production. And in order fully to appreciate him, we must not forget that the role of a patriotic poet is not an easy one to perform. While the lyrical poet can, like the spider (shocking comparison!), squeeze his thread out of himself, the patriotic poet must draw on outside materials. He finds the stuff in the contents of the past but, whether he is aware of it or not, he must first answer the questions, What past, What contents.

Such questions arose with peculiar sharpness in the American countries as they started on their separate paths, gradually diverging from those of Europe. Previously, they had felt no difficulty in identifying themselves with their European mother countries. The inhabitants of Spanish America, before independence, spoke and wrote about themselves as Spaniards just as unconcernedly as Crémazie shortly afterwards wrote "nous Français." In such cases — as well as in those of British America and Brazil — the national names were used in a Pickwickian sense, meaning something which was true under the then prevailing conditions, but not otherwise. When the conditions changed, the question of the national past had to be thrashed out afresh, both in history and in literature, but again under a set of given assumptions, which, in fact, prevented for a long time an encounter with reality.

The new countries in what came to be known as Latin America tried to fabricate a satisfactory past for themselves by drawing on two sources. On the one hand, they glorified some shadowy Indian figures, usually dug out from sixteenth-

century Spanish poems and chronicles, thus underscoring their dependence on cultural colonialism while asserting their political independence; in addition, they turned the leaders of the recent wars of independence into hallowed "national heroes." The rejection of the colonial past and the acceptance of the newly devised past varied from country to country. In Argentina in the 1830's some intellectuals were all for abandoning the Spanish language altogether, as not being their "own" language, but the frenzy soon abated. In Mexico it is even now an article of faith that everything good in the country derives from the Aztecs. In Venezuela, Simon Bolivar stands above criticism and is celebrated not only as the "liberator" but also as a fine warrior, statesman, writer, and even lover. In any case, having thus peopled their Pantheon, the Latin American countries found themselves adequately supplied with feedstock for any number of patriotic songs and poems, in which easily recognizable names came forth again and again and will keep turning up until a new mythology is evolved.

Matters have taken a different course in the United States. The country has become so big and powerful, through peaceful and military expansion, that it retains but a slight linkage with the strip of land it was at the time of independence. Consequently, the real national hero is the American people itself (Whitman's *O Pioneers*), while the names of Washington, Jefferson, and other *patres patriae* receive but perfunctory homage. Interestingly enough, independence brought about there, too, a certain nostalgic feeling for the original Indian inhabitants, a feeling which found expression in literature. James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* and Longfellow's *Hiawatha* both saw light in Crémazie's lifetime.

Crémazie, in turn, found himself as a writer in a position as peculiar as that of his own people. French Canada never had the chance to wrest its independence from the French monarchy, thus experiencing a break with the colonial past; its lot was to be wrenched from the mother country and placed under another foreign jurisdiction, which, even if exercising control, did not attempt to crush it to death. The path open to French Canada was that of peaceful development towards ever-growing self-assertion, a path leading, to be sure, to very tangible results but not particularly hedged in with heroics. Crémazie, who was a rather unpolitical man but had the epic cast of mind, could not find much inspiration in the Canadian developments taking place before his eyes.

The Indian theme did not appeal to him, either. For one thing, he did not need to fly back to the Indians since the shelter of colonial traditions had never been shaken off. Moreover, the Indians had resisted the inroads of the Christian religion as well as the French empire-building efforts, two parameters which largely determined Crémazie's scheme of things. Consequently, he looked on them from a distance, if not actually askance. There are few references to the Indians in his poetry, where they appear mostly as the hopelessly defeated, nursing their

impotent hatred in some solitary spot, but unconnected with the main stream of Canadian life:

Il est là sombre et fier; sur la forêt immense,
Où ses pères ont vu resplendir leur puissance,
Son oeil noir et perçant lance un regard amer.

Pensif dans son canot, que la vague balance,
L'Iroquois vers Québec lance un regard de feu;
Toujours rêveur et sombre, il contemple en silence
L'étendard de la France et la croix du vrai Dieu.

Nous regardons passer les ombres
Des Algonquins, des Iroquois.
Ils viennent, ces rois d'un autre âge,
Conter leur antiques grandeurs . . .²⁴

But while Crémazie pleaded for his own people, whom he considered oppressed and deprived, he showed himself unable to understand the fate of those indigenous Canadians who had been bereft of everything, including existence. He had a few kind words for the Hurons only, who had the merit, in his eyes, of having fought for the French:

. . . le grand chef huron pleurant sur son destin . . .
L'Iroquois terrassée par la valeur huronne . . .
Allez! Des vieux Hurons les mânes ranimés,
Se levant tout à coup dans la forêt sonore,
Frémiront de bonheur en revoyant encore
Les fils de ces Français qu'ils avaient tant aimés.²⁵

Having neither a war of independence nor a congenial Indian background to fall back upon, Crémazie had to cast about for suitable patriotic stuff with which to fill his songs, and he laid his hands on the Anglo-French rivalry for empire in the eighteenth century. This was as good a subject as any and might have lent itself to some resounding verse-making, but it contained a fatal flaw. By playing up the struggle of the then Superpowers it reduced the small colonial people to a very passive role. It is not for me to say whether Crémazie imposed this subject on his readers or tried, rather cunningly, to play on an existing mood. His recent editor seems at one point to incline to the latter view:

C'est en 1855 que Crémazie, encouragé sans doute par son ami Émile de Fenouillet, accepte le rôle qui s'offre naturellement à lui, celui de chanteur de la patrie. L'inspiration du poème de 1854 est hugolienne et exotique, du moins dans la première partie; on y découvre à peine une allusion à la France. Mais, à partir de la *Guerre d'Orient*, Crémazie cherche à se mettre au diapason de ses lecteurs. . . Ils restent insensibles au charme exotique des *Orientales*. Par contre, le thème de la France les remue profondément. Le poète cherche donc à se concilier leur suffrages en exploitant leur penchant pour l'émotion patriotique.²⁶

Be that as it may, the fact remains — a fact which is very difficult to grasp for a reader not emotionally involved with Crémazie's views — that we are here confronted with a professedly "patriotic" poet who can hardly say anything good of his native soil except as the arena where another nation performed its exploits. Gratitude is appropriate and becoming when a people are in debt to another for their blood, their faith, their language, and their traditions, but gratitude is not incompatible with self-esteem. Quebec, in Crémazie's scheme of things, appears weak, subdued, and forlorn, and cannot aspire to any greater good than the return of the French flag. France must have been for Crémazie a singularly powerful image, which would explain such weakening of his homeland to the point of helplessness. In discussing this "patriotic" poetry, one should begin by trying to find out just who or what that France of Crémazie's was.

THE FIRST THING THAT BECOMES APPARENT is that his France existed outside the stream of time and change, and the point has been noticed more than once. Professor Michel Dassonville, for example, wrote:

Ce serait une erreur d'interpréter en un sens politique les hymnes héroïques qu'il écrivit. . . . Par un mélange politique si audacieux qu'il eût fait gronder Victor Hugo lui-même, il chantait dans le même hymne Magenta, Marignan, Solferino, Marengo, Desaix et les *grands jours de Messidor*, Napoléon I^{er} et Napoléon III, mais on voit aisément que son chant dépassait l'actualité politique pour exalter la gloire française.²⁷

But this idea of glory is highly ethereal since it reduces a nation to a disembodied ghost of itself. A Frenchman from France, for whom his country was a complex of problems and loyalties and interests, would have been a legitimist, an orleanist, a bonapartist, or a republican. Crémazie was simply a votary of France, unconnected and unconcerned with the issues of politics or economics. It is true that, before his enforced residence in France, and for all his talk of "nous Français," he was a foreigner to France and as such he could be excused a close interest in those matters; but this does not prove much, because he also abhorred such divisions in his own Canada and dreamt only of an unbroken unity. The real political evolution of his country interested him but little.²⁸

We must also remark that if Crémazie did not feel bound to any particular time or regime in his affection for France, he felt no compulsion, either, to locate any stringent moral standards in it. He resented the Cession of Quebec and any other defeat of France, but he was always prepared to applaud a French victory, any French victory. Consistency not being one of Crémazie's virtues, he had no difficulty in presenting two contradictory portraits of France almost side by side in the same poem — as the champion of right and the mistress of the world, as

the protector of some peoples and the oppressor of other peoples. In both cases, it was only French "glory" that mattered:

Vengeresse du droit et maîtresse du monde

 Dans le malheur, c'est toi qu'implore
 La voix des peuples opprimés

 Déjà les tribus africaines
 Devant ton nom tremblent d'effroi.²⁹

Parenthetically, one might add that Crémazie, who could work himself into a passion of enthusiasm for the Turks or the Italians, provided that their causes coincided with the policies of France at a given moment, was not an unconditional advocate of smaller nations against powerful neighbours. He regarded with perfect equanimity, for instance, the increasing presence of the United States in Latin America and could even praise what the Americans were doing:

Le peuple américain, dans son essor puisant,
 Vers son grand avenir marche à pas de géant;
 Posant un pied hardi sur le Chimborazo,
 Plante son étendard aux murs de Mexico.³⁰

But five years later the United States was receiving a fierce castigation from Crémazie, for reasons which to him were extremely cogent. For one thing, he believed that America was providing assistance to the Russians, that is to say, opposing France then at war with the Czar; for another, he feared that the "pas de géant" might be turning North with a view to the annexation of Canada:

Et si jamais un jour la république austère,
 Qui donne à l'autocrate un appui mercenaire,
 Nous voulait immoler à son ambition,
 Des jours de Châteauguay ressuscitant la gloire,
 Sachons défendre encore et donner la victoire
 Au drapeau d'Albion.³¹

No, consistency was not one of Crémazie's virtues. He was consistent only in upholding the name of France, and this devotion compelled him to perform some fearful somersaults, in disregard both of actual conditions and of standards of general validity. The fact is that France, the France that caused Crémazie to belittle his own Canada, was made for him of a stuff other than that of a real nation. She did not exist in the material world but in his own soul, as an image symbolic of some mental processes at which we can no more than guess, since his innermost feelings are still wrapped in darkness. The outward traits — his commitment to a definite set of cultural and religious values, which he found ready-made in his environment — were in full view, as they made up the burden of

most of the poetry he wrote before the source was sealed. It is arguable, however, that he carried another melody in his soul, which began gradually to emerge as the deeper notes in his respectable poems, until it burst into a terrifying fortissimo in his "Promenade de trois morts." Had he been able to surmount the crisis that shattered his expectations, he might have adhered to this new course and, putting aside the mantle of patriotic bard, given full expression to that more intimately personal source of inspiration. In the absence of specific revelations, there is nothing left but to search in his poems for clues that may help bring to light his strange inner landscape.

Let us make a start with the most famous of Crémazie's compositions, "Le drapeau de Carillon." It is a good poem for the present purpose because it is all about France as Crémazie saw it in his own mind. The image under which France is invoked is that of a mother who stays away from her children. The people of Quebec are repeatedly described as "seuls, abandonnés par la France leur mère," "un enfant qu'on arrache à sa mère," "fils malheureux," "enfants abandonnés," "ces fidèles enfants qu'il vouait à l'oubli." And when the old soldier had given up all hope and was dying of a broken heart, "il pleura bien longtemps, comme on pleure au tombeau d'une mère adorée." All the soldier's faith and love are reserved for "la France adorée"; to his fellow Canadians he cannot give any encouragement to stand on their own feet and work out their own salvation, but only the pious fraud that the French soldiers will come again and will bring back the past. While for the conquerors there is only an innocuous commonplace, "un joug ennemi," all the hostility which must form the counterpart of the expressions of love is poured on official France, including the king ("faible Bourbon," "un roi sans honneur," "ce prince avili"), the court circles ("les lâches courtisans") and the culture of the Enlightenment ("Voltaire alors riait de son rire d'enfer"). The only time when he speaks kindly of the king is when, to the still hopeful mind of the old soldier, he is another image for his beloved France ("ce grand roi pour qui nous avons combattu"). The circumstantial "grand roi" is not to be confused with another and earlier "Grand Roi," who is the embodiment of the powerful and creative France from which French Canada had issued.

It is tempting to reduce Crémazie's France, in the language of psychology, to the mother-image, and the conflict expressed in his poetry to a separation from the mother. The Cession, the wrenching of young Quebec from the protecting arms of Mother France, was a good symbol for this psychological reality, and Crémazie exploited it effectively as he projected Canada into the image of the forsaken child.³² Of course, the usual reaction after the separation from the mother is for the new being to brave the unsympathetic world and pull himself together in discharging the responsibilities of adult age, as regards both himself in self-preservation and the species in fruitful love. Only those who feel themselves

unequal to those responsibilities shrink back and long for the lost haven of maternal protection. This is familiar psychological theory, which C. G. Jung, while dealing with it at large, expresses pithily when he speaks of:

the longing to go back to mother, which is opposed to the adaptation to reality Any weakening of the adult man strengthens the wishes of the unconscious; therefore, the decrease of strength appears directly as the backward striving towards the mother.³³

As for the father, his role, in this connection, is that of a force keeping the son at a distance from the mother, or as Jung puts it:

the father, in the psychological sense, merely represents the personification of the incest prohibition; that is to say, resistance, which defends the mother.³⁴

It is in this sense that we may interpret Crémazie's attitude to official France, which is guided by the way in which official France deals with the Canadian offspring. He expresses a violent hatred for the French regime which permitted the separation of Quebec from France; he feels respect for the "Grand Roi" as for the begetting father, a figure of power and dignity to whom the child is thankful for his life; and he may wax enthusiastic about such powerful rulers — Napoleons I and III — as are likely, in his imagination at least, to lift the incest prohibition, that is, to assist a return of Quebec to the arms of Mother France. On behalf of Quebec, but without consulting her, the poet renounces the opportunity to meet life on its own terms and prefers to turn his eyes back to the sheltered past. It is up to the historian to judge Crémazie's view of history; we are trying to grasp the construction that the poet put on his own experience of life.

Taking up the poem again, I consider the fourth stanza of particular importance as a summing-up of the themes of "Le drapeau de Carillon":

De nos bords s'élevaient de longs gémissements,
Comme ceux d'un enfant qu'on arrache à sa mère;
Et le peuple attendait plein de frémissements,
En implorant le ciel dans sa douleur amère,
Le jour où pour la France et son nom triomphant
Il donnerait encore et son sang et sa vie;
Car privé des rayons de ce soleil ardent.
Il était exilé dans sa propre patrie.³⁵

Here we have the forlorn child and the absent mother, as well as two interesting glimpses into Crémazie's mind. He is thinking not really of life for his people but of death. He knows well enough that the old days were not of peace and plenty but of recurring war with all its misery and want, all for the sake of France's glorious name; yet he desires to bring back that very misery. The last line is beautifully concise and eloquent, but what a dreadful thought it is, what an utter

negation of all chance for the Quebec people to live on, in their own right and for their own ends. Indeed, in Crémazie's thought, they are forsaken children and France is the mother on whose embrace they must depend for their life and also, preposterous though it may sound, for their death. Life and death seem to be exchangeable values as long as they bring about the only fulfilment that Crémazie allows his people — reunion with Mother France.

This is the fulfilment granted, under peculiar circumstances, to the old soldier of Carillon. When it becomes certain that France will not come again, he goes back to her, in seeking to meet his death on the old battlefield and under the old flag. While on his actual trip to France the old man had felt a renewal of his youthful vigour when he came in sight of Saint-Malo; now on the hill of Carillon he seems to find again his lost childhood:

Planant sur l'horizon, son triste et long regard
 Semblait trouver des lieux chéris de son enfance.
 Sombre et silencieux il pleura bien longtemps,
 Comme on pleure au tombeau d'une mère adorée.³⁶

And now the moment has come at last for him to die, and in his final anguished cry he finds words of a truly epic tone:

Qu'ils sont heureux ceux qui dans la mêlée
 Près de Lévis moururent en soldats!
 En expirant, leur âme consolée
 Voyait la gloire adoucir leur trépas.
 Vous qui dormez dans votre froide bière,
 Vous que j'implore à mon dernier soupir,
 Réveillez-vous! Apportant ma bannière,
 Sur vos tombeaux, je viens ici mourir.³⁷

The words awaken an echo in the reader. One is inevitably reminded of Aeneas' death-wish, when the sea-storm seemed likely to engulf him and the fleet with the survivors from Troy:

O terque quaterque beati
 Quis ante ora patrum, Troiae sub moenibus altis
 Contigit oppetere! O Danaum fortissime gentis
 Tydide, mene Iliacis occumbere campis
 Non potuisse tuaque animam hanc effundere dextra,
 Saevus ubi Aeacidæ telo iacet Hector, ubi ingens
 Sarpedon, ubi tot Simois correpta sub undis
 Scuta virum galeasque et fortis corpora volvit.³⁸

Crémazie's phrase "près de Lévis" unfolds itself, revealing a deeper meaning if we compare it with Virgil's double expression "ante ora patrum, Troiae sub moenibus altis": it is a regret not to have lost one's life before seeing the fall of the home city, the regret of the child who is left to face a hostile world after the

the mother is gone. Aeneas' heart in the storm scene appears at its weakest; with Crémazie this weakness is a habitual mood.

Another poem, "Le vieux soldat canadien," develops more or less the same topics as "Le drapeau." It shows the same longing for Mother France, which glides all too easily into a longing for extinction. The old soldier, when he hears the reports of Napoleon's victories, cannot hope for anything better than for his own country to be visited by the same plague of war -- he calls it "cette immense épopée" -- which was ravaging Europe:

Quand les fiers bulletins des exploits de la France
Venaient des Canadiens ranimer l'espérance,
On voyait le vieillard tressaillir de bonheur;
Et puis il regardait sa glorieuse épée,
Espérant que bientôt cette immense épopée
Viendrait sous nos remparts réveiller sa valeur.³⁹

Not, in my opinion, a very patriotic wish, although allowance must be made for Crémazie's unreflecting enthusiasm for war, before he saw it at close quarters. There is some irony in the thought that, whatever the pious hopes of the old soldier, Quebec would probably have hated the very sight of Napoleon's soldiers on her soil, to judge by the abundant *littérature antibonapartiste* that was written in those days.⁴⁰

The old soldier, in his expectation of France, is also searching for his own childhood:

Et là, sur ce beau fleuve où son heureuse enfance
Vit le drapeau français promener sa puissance,
Regrettant ces beaux jours, il jetait ses regards.⁴¹

He lives his last days waiting for the dawn (a symbol of childhood; has not Victor Hugo written the beautiful words: *Enfant, vous êtes l'aube . . . ?*), that is to say, the dawn of the new era ("De ce grand jour quand verrai-je l'aurore?"); but in his weariness he also utters a variation on Aeneas' death-wish:

Que n'ai-je, hélas! au milieu des batailles,
Trouvé plus tôt un glorieux trépas. . . .⁴²

Finally, he dies. The soldier of Carillon was surrounded in his last moments by a bleak December landscape; this second soldier dies while a storm is raging. In both cases, the images of an overpowering, unrelenting world pursue them in their homecoming.

IN OTHER POEMS CRÉMAZIE INSISTS ON his image of France as a mother and the Quebec people as helpless children:

Enfants abandonnés bien loin de notre mère

O Canada, fils de la France,
Qui te couvrit de ses bienfaits⁴³

but we are beginning to perceive that it is the mother-image which gives significance to France, and not the other way around. The mother-image dominates the poetry of Crémazie, even in those poems in which the France-Quebec relationship is not present. The poem "La Fiancée du marin" — that rarity in Crémazie's production, a love poem — sheds some interesting sidelight on this question.

The bride is as colourless as she can be. There is infinitely more warmth in "la blonde," though sketched in one line, in "Le chant des voyageurs," than in this romantic heroine whom Crémazie describes as a paragon of all virtues but without making her alive to us. It is the mother of the sailor who presides over the story. She has found the little girl that the waves had left on the shore and has brought her up as her own daughter. Later, at the mother's desire ("répondant aux vœux de sa mère"), a betrothal is arranged between the orphan girl and the sailor son. When the man sails away, the fiancée and the mother are left in each other's company. Together they pray for him, and together they grieve when he fails to return. Soon the mother dies, too, is buried in the sea, and in a way becomes identified with the sea, just as in the beginning the sea had taken on the character of a mother in giving birth to the stranded girl. The equivalence sea:mother fits in very naturally in Crémazie's poem, although it did not originate with him and is, indeed, a very old one, as all life comes from the sea, a fact of which mankind has always been aware:

The sea is, of course, a woman in most languages, from obvious physical associations, but in French these associations are enormously strengthened by the verbal associations: the words for 'mother' and the 'sea' are the same in sound.⁴⁴

The fiancée, unable to live by herself, loses her mind and frequents the seashore as if looking for somebody. It would be romantic to imagine that she is looking for her dead lover, but even in this extremity the mother is there, sharing in her demented thoughts. We may remark in passing that the fiancée's complaint is not too different from the wording of Quebec's plight in "Le Drapeau" or "Le vieux soldat":

M'oubliez-vous, pauvre isolée,
Que personne n'a consolée
Dans ses douleurs?
Car je suis seule sur la terre,
Seule et mêlant à l'onde amère
Mes tristes pleurs.⁴⁵

In the end, the poor girl seems to hear voices calling from beneath the waves. Is

it her mother? Maybe it is her brother (she does not call him "lover"). She follows the call and plunges in the sea with a joyful cry:

J'y vais . . . Ah! dans vos bras, ma mère,
Recevez-moi!⁴⁶

It is remarkable that she goes to join, as she says, not her bridegroom but the mother. We do not know what "mother" she means, whether the sea she originally came from or the woman who cared for her in childhood, but one thing is clear: in the poem by Crémazie, the reunion with the mother is a union with death. And this consummation brings back an echo of C. G. Jung's analysis:

in the morning of life man painfully tears himself loose from the mother, from the domestic hearth, to rise through battle to the heights. Not seeing his worst enemy in front of him, but bearing him within himself in a deadly longing for the depths within, for drowning in his own source, for becoming absorbed into the mother, his life is a constant struggle with death, a violent and transitory delivery from the always lurking night. This death is no external enemy, but a deep personal longing for quiet and for the profound peace of non-existence, for a dreamless sleep in the ebb and flow of the sea of life.⁴⁷

This is the fate of the sailor's fiancée, this drowning in her own source. The last stanza in the poem develops in a way which is familiar with Crémazie, the return of the dead in possession of an illusory fulfilment in lieu of the one they missed in life; the girl, the sailor and the mother come together again, but as mournful wraiths:

On dit que le soir, sous les ormes,
On voit errer trois blanches formes,
Spectres mouvants,
Et qu'on entend trois voix plaintives
Se mêler souvent sur les rives
Au bruit des vents.⁴⁸

In happier stories it is an outside event that brings the dead out of their tombs. In "Colonisation" the old Hurons rise at the coming of the descendants of the old French. In "Le vieux soldat canadien," the report of a French gun, fired when a French warship visited Quebec in 1855 for the first time after the Cession, makes the old man leave the grave in the belief that the long awaited day is there at last. Of course, the gun of a warship was required to work this miracle: for Crémazie, in whom the businessman waned as the poet waxed, the honest noises of trade would not have awakened anybody in Quebec. And the old soldier was not the only one to find such shadowy happiness in death:

Tous les vieux Canadiens moissonnés par la guerre
Abandonnent aussi leur couche funéraire,
Pour voir réalisés leurs rêves les plus beaux.

Et puis on entendit, le soir, sur chaque rive,
 Se mêler au doux bruit de l'onde fugitive
 Un long chant de bonheur qui sortait des tombeaux.⁴⁹

This "long chant de bonheur qui sortait des tombeaux" is Crémazie, we won't say at his best, but certainly at his most typical. Indeed, for Crémazie the dead find the misty kind of happiness he has reserved for them when their death brings about a reunion with the mother, when mother and death are the same solemn reality. In the "Promenade de trois morts," of the three dead who return to earth (father, husband, and son), the father finds disappointment in his child and the husband in his widow, but the son is comforted in the pious and unwavering remembrance of the mother:

Seul, le fils trouve sa mère agenouillée, pleurant toujours son enfant et priant Dieu pour lui. Un ange recueille à la fois ses prières, pour les porter au ciel, et ses larmes, qui se changent en fleurs et dont il ira parfumer la tombe d'un fils bien-aimé.⁵⁰

The other two dead, in order to find the solace they have been denied by their family ties, must look to the mother-image under a different form — the Mother Church:

Le père et l'époux viennent demander à la mère universelle, l'Église, ce souvenir et ces prières qu'ils n'ont pu trouver à leur foyers profanés par des affections nouvelles.⁵¹

Here we seem to touch upon a characteristic trait of Crémazie's poetry, the undervaluation of the present and the future, as represented by the love of wife and son, and the overvaluation of the past, as represented by the mother's love. Crémazie says quite clearly that the man who tries to save his life in the loves of adult age shall certainly lose it, while the man who gives it up in a return to the mother's love shall certainly find it again. If you marry life and beget in her, you shall find yourself cheated, for life and the fruits of life will not stay with you; but if you return to the no-life from which you originally sprang, the eternal mother will not disappoint you. Your defeat by default will be redeemed through her victory, and in this sense Crémazie could have said of death what he says of France:

Douce mère qui sait, au sein de la victoire,
 Faire toujours veiller un rayon de sa gloire
 Sur les tombeaux de ses enfants.⁵²

In the same way, there is a close link between the mother in the garb of Glory who cries for the dead soldier, and the real mother whose tear brings solace to the dead youth who is not yet accustomed to his grave:

Et, pleurant son enfant, la Gloire désolée
 Alla veiller sur son tombeau.

Ah! ma mère, c'est toi, dont la tendresse sainte
Vient répandre à la fois tes larmes et ta plainte
Sur le tombeau de ton enfant.⁵³

This is the assurance that Crémazie desires. There is no hope in life, but at least let us make sure that the mother's love will not fail us in death, because if we lose that we have lost everything:

Douter si l'être pur à qui l'on doit la vie
Sur son fils verse encore une larme bénie:
Quel tourment de l'enfer égale cette horreur?⁵⁴

The poetic expression of Crémazie is so perfectly attuned to the deep melody of death that it is not surprising to find that he borrows extensively from the vocabulary of mortality. One of his favourite words is tomb (*tombeau, tombe, fosse*), which appears 65 times; there are but few of his poems without a tomb in them.⁵⁵ The dead (*les morts, cadavre, mourant, meurt, manes, expirant, endormi, trépassé*) are mentioned 67 times; death (*la mort, agonie, trépas*) 48 times; the verb to die (*mourir, succomber, expirer, s'éteindre, tomber*) 46 times; the graveyard and human remains (*cimetière, les os, squelette*) 12 times; adjectives descriptive of death's presence (*lugubre, mortel, funèbre, sepulcral*) 9 times. A single word possessing a very high count is "worm" (*ver, vermisseau*), which occurs 46 times, all but one, it is true, in just one poem, "Promenade de trois morts." All in all, and not including many paraphrases and metaphors, Crémazie studs his small offering of poetry with no less than 329 references to death, and the number might be increased by a stricter treatment of allusions.

Of special interest, as illustrating Crémazie's peculiar theory of continued existence and suffering in death, are those expressions with which he indicates the abode of the dead, the place where the painful change into dust is accomplished. Such expressions are, for instance: *demeure sombre* (twice), *royaume morne* (3 times), *cité des morts* (twice), *lieu de misère* (twice), *cité pleurante, froides prisons, gouffre d'horreurs, l'océan de douleurs que l'on nomme la tombe...* The proximity of some of these expressions to Dante's "città dolente" should not lead one into a false analogy. What Dante had in mind was, in keeping with mediaeval theology, the place of pain appointed for the souls, while Crémazie, who for all his rhetorical playing up of the faith made but little use of the Christian Beyond, really means the extraordinary processes he imagines going on in the charnel house, where the worm and not the devil deals with the flesh of the dead.

This abundant concern with death does not, however, place Crémazie in the line of graveyard poets, which had been ushered in by Thomas Gray's *Elegy* and was suitably closed by the Spaniard Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer (1836-1870) with a meditation on the loneliness of the dead ("Qué solos se quedan los muertos").

The difference is, it seems to me, that for the graveyard poets, however sympathetic, the dead were dead, maybe a subject for the cogitations of the living but in themselves a finality, while for Crémazie, in disregard both of biology and theology, death was a drama still to be enacted within the grave.

THE INSISTENCE ON THE MOTHER-IMAGE and the strong identification of it with the image of death make one pause in the probe into Crémazie's poetry to shift attention to Crémazie's personality. What kind of man was he? The person who knows most about him, his recent editor, although she was able to profit from all the previous publications besides following up many new documentary trails, had to admit that the poet's intimate life, as different from the figure he cut in the public eye, remains largely hidden from us. In this respect she writes:

en compulsent divers documents, on peut tracer un portrait plus complet du poète et du libraire, du citoyen et de l'exilé. Mais notre connaissance de l'homme dans sa vie intime est malgré tout incomplète.⁵⁶

On the basis of the known outward facts and of the self-revelations contained in his poetry, and with the utmost diffidence which must attend on such inquiries, an attempt can be made to follow the man into his retreat. While verse-making and bodily stamina are not necessarily connected, and the robust bards of the Renaissance are just as genuine as the haggard songsters of Romanticism, we may notice that Crémazie came from a physically weak strain, in which most children died at an early age. His father was the only survivor out of four, and the poet and two brothers were the only survivors out of twelve. These death rates were very high, even for the conditions of the epoch. Is it permissible to infer from this a diminished vitality in Crémazie, which may have told on his attitude to life and death? On the other hand, the predominance of the mother-image seems to point to an arrested emotional development coupled with a reluctance to face up to the demands of life. Indeed the little that is known of Crémazie's story amounts to a tale of frustrations. Physically unattractive, just average as a student, and a failure as a businessman, he did not feel, either, that he was duly appreciated by his readers, whom he dubbed the *épiciers*. To these external sources of despondency were added others derived from an inadequacy to meet the demands of social life. The testimonies point in this direction:

Chez lui la vie sentimentale semble avoir été à peu près inexistante. Il nourrit pour sa mère des sentiments d'une vive affection; seul dans le grand Paris, il lui écrit maintes lettres imprégnées de piété filiale et de gratitude. Quant à unir sa vie à celle d'une Canadienne ou d'une Française, il n'y songe guère; c'est même là le cadet de ses soucis.

Octave Crémazie, plus que beaucoup d'autres, était un homme classé. Il avait dit un jour qu'il ne donnerait pas un poil de sa barbe pour une femme; il ne recherchait donc pas la société des dames, d'où sa lourde apparence semblait du reste l'éloigner, et ses habitudes étaient routinières à l'extrême. Jamais on ne le rencontrait dans un salon; rarement pouvait-on l'apercevoir dans un lieu d'amusement publique... Je le plaisantais sur ce mot de célibataire invétéré qui avait fait le tour des salons de Québec. "Pour être franc, me dit-il, je dois confesser que je songe quelquefois au mariage — mais seulement lorsqu'il manque un bouton à mon gilet ou à ma redingote."⁵⁷

For Octave Crémazie adult life was empty of the duties and satisfactions that usually go with it. The present was distasteful and the future held no promise; Crémazie turned then to history and directed his poetic energy to a revival of the past. With or without reason, he identified his lack of personal fulfilment with the position of his people, and used the story of the Cession as a symbol of his own inability to face the world. He found no way ahead for himself, and therefore he denied any independent development to his people; he rejected adult love and sought refuge in the mother-image, and therefore he made his people into a forsaken child and bade it fix its only hope on a return of Mother France.

But this rejection of the responsibilities of adult age, once started, can go backward very far indeed. The front door shut in the face of the life instinct may cause the back door to open on its dark and dreadful opposite. The regression to childhood, or for that matter to the womb, cancels the storms and stresses of existence: the mother's love and power will stand between them and the child. And this peace and repose are more completely found when we are received into the bosom of a mightier mother, into the depths of non-existence out of which we all originally came. Thus, the quest for the mother develops into a quest for death; and this is a step which the poetry of Crémazie takes quite effortlessly.

The figure of France which appears so often in his "patriotic" poems has, as we have remarked, no specific features and it dissolves easily into the mother-image. But this mother-image is no more permanent, for the image of death is lurking closely behind it. It is not a sinister or unwelcome death, because it does not come as the thief of the future; Crémazie rather hails it as the restorer of the past, the beneficent giver of shelter against the harsh realities of living the present and begetting the future. It is really a Mother Death; and the dead, in the poet's waywardly tender image, are her babies: "Ils semblent de la mort être les nouveau-nés."⁵⁸

But at the moment of reaching such insights, in the "Promenade de trois morts," Crémazie found himself isolated. His readers, who had met with familiar names and pointers in his "patriotic" poems, could not follow him as he entered a new field in which he dropped the conventional allusions — France and battles old and new are never mentioned in the "Promenade" — and addressed his innermost feelings in more direct terms. If he had continued to develop this way

and had fully unfolded the vision he carried in him, he might have produced a body of poetry more intensely personal, thus securing perhaps a more prominent place in literary history. He did not go far enough, however, and the new face he showed surprised and shocked his readers. Besides abandoning the well-known "patriotic" subjects, he even approached heterodoxy in religion. He held peculiar views on the state after death; he cast doubts on the consoling belief that it is for the sake of Man that creation exists. In his poem, Man exists for the sake of the worm, or such is the worm's religious tenet:

Ton cadavre, pour moi c'est la source de vie
 Où je m'abreuve chaque jour

 Oh! je sais mieux jouir des biens que Dieu m'envoie.⁵⁹

If his views had begun to isolate Crémazie, he was completely cut off when a business failure in 1862 compelled him to leave Canada for good and he sought refuge in France. Even so, one might have expected that this event, blighting as it was to his family and social connections, but coming after all his extolling of and longing for France, would release in him a vast outpouring of poetry. Nothing of the sort happened. He lived on in France for sixteen years, longer than his entire poetic career in Canada but, apart from some minor *pièces de circonstance*, no more poetry came from him. His great "Promenade de trois morts" had been left unfinished, but now all he could do was draft a prose summary of the missing second and third parts.

Octave Crémazie experienced, indeed, the return to Mother Death not only in imagination but also in person. On the 11th of November, 1862, the day he left Canada for France, he actually died as a poet. He was well aware of the fact himself and could describe it as follows:

J'ai bien deux mille vers au moins qui traînent dans les coins et recoins de mon cerveau. À quoi bon les en faire sortir? Je suis mort maintenant à l'existence littéraire. Laissons donc ces pauvres vers pourrir tranquillement dans la tombe que je leur ai creusée au fond de ma mémoire. Dire que je ne fais plus de poésie serait mentir. Mon imagination travaille toujours un peu. J'ébauche, mais je ne termine rien, et, suivant ma coutume, je n'écris rien. Je ne chante que pour moi.⁶⁰

This is also the finding to which Odette Condemine arrives in surveying Crémazie's French period:

Il ne se tournera plus vers la vie: dans son exil, il peut se croire oublié comme le sont les morts dans leur tombeau.⁶¹

But, like his dead who sank but gradually into death, Crémazie was not yet finished. He could not or would not write any more poetry — he gave ill health as an excuse although there may have been other grounds — but he reappeared

as a competent writer of prose. His letters to his acquaintances in Canada became the vehicle for the new insights, partially cancelling his old fervours, which he gathered during his actual experience of France. He learnt that France was not the country of his dreams but a country like any other, with much good but with some evil in it. In his disappointment, however, he swung violently in the opposite direction and disparaged France as unrestrictedly as he had previously idealized her:

Je croyais à la France chevaleresque de nos pères. Hélas! quelle était mon erreur! Au lieu de cette grande nation qui tient une si large place dans les annales de l'histoire, il n'y a plus aujourd'hui qu'une agglomération d'hommes sans principes, sans moeurs, sans foi et sans dignité.⁶²

Besides, he realized that his own countrymen were, after all, and even in the absence of France, not as unhappy as he had depicted them:

Franchement nos paysans sont beaucoup plus heureux que ceux de France.⁶³

In this connection, one of the two short stories that Crémazie wrote in his French period, "Un homme qui ne peut se marier," is particularly significant. The plot is simple and straightforward. A French-Canadian trapper comes to France and wants to marry a French girl. The trapper is a handsome fellow and he has four thousand pounds sterling in his pocket; he is accepted by the girl, and by the girl's father. The project, however, comes to grief on the formalities which are routine in an old settled country but unheard of in the wilderness of the North. The trapper has, of course, no birth certificate and he cannot get one. In the Far North there are no townhalls and no registers. And who could attest to it, anyway? His mother was eaten by a grizzly bear, his father was scalped by the Indians, and his fellow trappers are all scattered by the hazards of their adventures. Consequently, the man from the Far North cannot get married in Paris. Crémazie has skilfully presented the New World at its rawest to emphasize the contrast with civilized Europe, and the conclusion is obvious. Canada, the New France, is not a new France, just as Mexico, the New Spain, is not a new Spain and New Zealand is not a new Zealand. Canada is just Canada, a part of the American continent, and, in accepting this fact, Crémazie has learnt a lesson wholly at variance with his earlier views. To put it within the framework of his story, France is not his mother and, just as with the trapper from the North, she cannot even become his mother-in-law.

Crémazie had clearly matured, leaving the phase of his "patriotic" dreams far behind him. His thought had deepened and he had finally something to say over and above the naive praises of French exploits. In his letters to H. R. Casgrain, which deserve rather the name of essays, there are acute reflections about the preconditions for the flowering of literature in the New World. But one is left with the impression of a man who has just learnt to speak when a self-imposed

silence stunts his utterance. And this withering of his powers occurred, contrary to all expectations, when he settled on the soil which contained, as he had imagined, the roots of his life. Crémazie found himself at last in the sheltering bosom of Mother France, but, as he had previously made clear in his own poetry, it turned out to be the bosom of Mother Death. There he forgot to sing, he lost his name and even his old appearance,⁶⁴ and while he could still haunt his friends with his letters, any communication with the reading public, which is the life of the writer, had become impossible. Thus he lingered for years, just a whisper, as it were, coming out of a tomb. Finally he was extinguished on that ocean shore from which he had previously dreamt that the past would return to Canada.

Enough has been said about Crémazie as a patriotic poet. His role as such seems to be played out in the estimation of the readers for whom he wrote his songs. He is not a writer who can be lightly dismissed. His powers were not perhaps of a very high order but they were real and, under different conditions, might have carried him further. He repays study, partly for his significance in a wider context than that of French Canada — namely, within the nineteenth-century literary scene of the American continent as a whole — and partly for the depths that lurk beneath his apparently facile poetry. He exhibited, for instance, a weird gift of prescience in busying himself with the subject of exile long before being personally overtaken by the need to flee his country. A spirit of prophecy seemed also at work in his warnings about an advance of Russia into Europe. And he certainly could and did convey a poetic vision of man's fate which, even if inimical to social values, did not want either in depth or in originality. A claim might be made, too, for Crémazie as the poet of childhood, in its simplest and most terrifying form:

O mère! c'est vers toi que notre coeur s'élançe
Et que tendent nos bras.⁶⁵

NOTES

- ¹ This paper was written thirty years ago at a time, during a residence of several years in Canada, in which I became interested in Canadian history and national development. I approached the subject of Crémazie with some hesitation, being well aware that my qualifications were hardly equal to the matter, but also conscious of the fact that, as I was neither Canadian nor French nor in any way directly involved in the issues, I might bring to their discussion that kind of objectivity which is dependent upon distance. The paper has now been rewritten in the light of the recent and most scholarly edition of Crémazie's works, *Oeuvres. Texte établi, annoté et présenté par Odette Condemine*, Éditions de l'Université d'Ottawa, 1972, 2 volumes. All quotations from Crémazie's writings in verse and prose are taken from this edition.
- ² Séraphim Marion, *Octave Crémazie, Précurseur du romantisme canadien-français*, in *Les lettres canadiennes d'autrefois*, vol. v (Ottawa: Éditions de l'Université, 1946), pp. 47-55.

- ³ Marion, p. 49 fn.
- ⁴ "Guerre d'Italie," pp. 147-53.
- ⁵ *Journal du siège de Paris*, II, p. 228.
- ⁶ "Premier jour de l'an 1849," pp. 117-20.
- ⁷ The American Henry James is a case in point. Cf. Christof Wegelin, *The Image of Europe in Henry James* (Dallas: Southern Methodist Univ. Press, 1958). It might be instructive to draw a parallel between Crémazie and Henry James in their obsession with specific European countries. And a study of Henry James would be incomplete without a reference to the Chilean novelist Alberto Blest Gana (1830-1920), who from his vantage point as long time ambassador to France wrote *Los trasplantados* (1904), a study of the Latin American wealthy in Paris who exchanged daughters and money for moth-eaten parchments.
- ⁸ *Oeuvres*, Introduction, I, p. 46.
- ⁹ "Le vieux soldat canadien," pp. 10-11.
- ¹⁰ "Sur les ruines de Sébastopol," pp. 151-53.
- ¹¹ "Le vieux soldat canadien," pp. 37-39.
- ¹² *Oeuvres*, Introduction, I, pp. 19, 90.
- ¹³ Marion, p. 166.
- ¹⁴ "Le jour de l'an 1852," pp. 57-60.
- ¹⁵ "Le Canada," pp. 9-12; "Le retour de 'L'Abeille,'" pp. 38-42; "Aux Canadiens français," pp. 73-80; "Chant pour la fête de Mgr. de Laval," pp. 1-2.
- ¹⁶ "L'alouette," pp. 31-32; "Le printemps," pp. 9-11.
- ¹⁷ "Fête nationale," pp. 13-20.
- ¹⁸ "Les Mille-Iles," pp. 5-8.
- ¹⁹ *Oeuvres*, Introduction, I, pp. 138-39.
- ²⁰ "Le chant des voyageurs," pp. 35-38.
- ²¹ "Colonisation," pp. 177-82.
- ²² A collective memory need not even be historical; a good fable will do just as well. The Roman Empire, in search of a past, adopted the mythical figure of Trojan Aeneas as the hero who had set in motion the chain of events leading up to the founding of Rome and everything thereafter. Virgil's *Aeneid* came at the right moment, when the expansion of Rome made a spiritual bond all the more necessary. Roman children everywhere, in Spain or on the Rhine, in Britain or in Asia, could learn from it not only their mother language at its best but also their Roman consciousness at its noblest.
- ²³ *Oeuvres*, Introduction, I, pp. 105, 207.
- ²⁴ "Le Potowatomis," pp. 1-3; "Epigraphe pour les anciens canadiens," pp. 9-12; "Chant des voyageurs," pp. 23-26.
- ²⁵ "Deux centième anniversaire," pp. 78, 46; "Colonisation," pp. 183-86.
- ²⁶ *Oeuvres*, Introduction, I, p. 71.
- ²⁷ Michel Dassonville, *Crémazie* (Collection Classiques Canadiens), p. 15.
- ²⁸ The most important Canadian event in his lifetime, Confederation, does not seem to have made much impression on Crémazie, let alone move him to celebrate it

in verse. He made a distant reference to it, fifteen months later, in a letter of October 10, 1868, addressed to Ernest Gagnon:

Depuis que j'ai dit à Québec cet adieu navrant que je crois éternel, le Canada a vu bien des changements. Vous avez un nouveau gouvernement, et la ville de Champlain est redevenue capitale. Vous avez cinq ou six baronets et *Sirs*, dont deux Canadiens français (*Oeuvres*, II, p. 110).

- ²⁹ "Guerre d'Italie," pp. 50, 119-20, 125-26.
- ³⁰ "Premier jour de l'an 1849," pp. 111-14.
- ³¹ "La guerre d'Orient," pp. 109-14.
- ³² A century after Crémazie, another Canadian poet took up again the child-parent theme (with a drop of psychology thrown in for good measure) to sketch a portrait of Canada, but the different viewpoint and the time-lag yielded a picture somewhat dissimilar from Crémazie's. Earle Birney, in the poem "Canada: case history," wrote:
- Parents unmarried and living abroad,
relatives keen to bag the estate,
schizophrenia not excluded,
will he learn to grow up before it's too late?
- Since both Birney and Crémazie stand for stages of the past, a comparison of their views does not lack a certain academic interest.
- ³³ C. G. Jung, *Psychology of the Unconscious*, trans. Beatrice M. Hinkle (New York, 1949), pp. 335-36.
- ³⁴ Jung, p. 364.
- ³⁵ "Le drapeau de Carillon," pp. 25-32.
- ³⁶ "Le drapeau," pp. 179-82.
- ³⁷ "Le drapeau," pp. 209-16.
- ³⁸ *Aeneid*, I, pp. 94-101.
- ³⁹ "Le vieux soldat canadien," pp. 25-30.
- ⁴⁰ Cf. S. Marion, *Lettres canadiennes d'autrefois*, vol. I, ch. 7, and vol. III, ch. 2.
- ⁴¹ "Le vieux soldat," pp. 34-36.
- ⁴² "Le vieux soldat," pp. 77-78.
- ⁴³ "Envoi au marins de 'La Capricieuse,'" p. 147; "Aux Canadiens français," pp. 45-46.
- ⁴⁴ Donat O'Donnell, *Maria Cross* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1947), p. 184.
- ⁴⁵ "La Fiancée du marin," pp. 163-68.
- ⁴⁶ "La Fiancée," pp. 185-86.
- ⁴⁷ Jung, p. 390.
- ⁴⁸ "La Fiancée," pp. 187-92.
- ⁴⁹ "Le vieux soldat canadien," pp. 123-28.
- ⁵⁰ "Promenade de trois morts," Plan de la suite, p. 425.
- ⁵¹ Ibid.
- ⁵² "Guerre d'Italie," pp. 88-90.
- ⁵³ "Un soldat de l'Empire," pp. 31-32; *Promenade de trois morts*, pp. 212-14.

- ⁵⁴ "Promenade de trois morts," pp. 630-32.
- ⁵⁵ We may note that Crémazie falls only once into the temptation of rhyming *tombe* (verb) and *tombe* (noun), while his master Victor Hugo took this liberty several times.
- ⁵⁶ *Oeuvres*. Note préliminaire, I, p. 12.
- ⁵⁷ S. Marion, *Lettres canadiennes d'autrefois*, vol. v, p. 13; E. Gagnon, *Pages choisies* (Quebec, 1917), p. 255.
- ⁵⁸ "Promenade de trois morts," p. 30.
- ⁵⁹ "Promenade de trois morts," pp. 175-76, 407.
- ⁶⁰ Lettre à H. R. Casgrain, 10 April 1866, II, p. 78.
- ⁶¹ *Oeuvres*, Introduction, I, p. 146.
- ⁶² Lettre à ses frères, 29 April 1871, II, p. 265.
- ⁶³ Lettre à ses frères, 8 June 1863, II, p. 61.
- ⁶⁴ In 1873 H. R. Casgrain saw Crémazie in Paris, for the first time after ten years: "Ce n'était plus le Crémazie dont la figure m'était familière à Québec; vieilli, amaigri, avec un teint de cire, plus chauve que jamais, ne portant plus de lunettes, la barbe toute rasée, hormis la moustache et une impériale: c'était une complète métamorphose . . . Sa tenue était devenue correcte, avec un air de distinction tout à fait inaccoutumé." *Notice biographique* in H. R. Casgrain, *Oeuvres complètes* (Montreal, 1885), vol. II, p. 411.
- ⁶⁵ "Sur les ruines de Sébastopol," pp. 161-62.

FOUR POEMS

Heather Spears

PROCEDURE

This is where you begin, then.
 The tidal flat, exhausted
 as after childbirth, the sunk white
 seafloor sucked back into the bone ring
 of rib and iliac,
 single eyed, brainless.
 This is what is left:
 continental shelf, and the moon drawn
 downrun, weighted inward.
 The mind winces in its attic, interested in spite of itself.