

THE USE OF THE FANTASTIC IN DENYS CHABOT'S "L'ELDORADO DANS LES GLACES"

André J. Senécal

FEW QUÉBEC NOVELS are truly fantastic works and among these, Denys Chabot's *Eldorado on Ice* is one of the most accomplished.¹ Published in 1978, it won the author the Gibson Prize (awarded to the best first novel of the year). *L'Eldorado dans les glaces* is a search for the real identity of the mysterious Oberlin, a latter-day *desdichado*, an intellectual nomad like Cendrars or Sengalen. In the initial narration (ascribed to Oberlin) we are guided through the eerie, snow-shrouded desolation of Québec's Abitibi region: a land of decaying mine encampments and ghostly settlements once inhabited by credulous colonists and gold-hungry adventurers. In this environment, where the landscape and the human landmarks conspire to distort reality. Oberlin confronts his double. The intentional use of a *doppelgänger* motif predominates in this episode. Victim of illusions or hallucinations, the hero attempts to integrate his self through hyperdefinitions. We are witnessing the last stages of the character's disintegration (or perhaps, the beginning of his reintegration). The key to Oberlin's identity, we are led to assume, resides in five names: Lorna, Blake, Faustin, Béate and Julie the half-breed. Do these names hide discrete entities or new manifestations of the hero's double? As each of the five voices becomes the narrator of a chapter of the novel, the reader and Oberlin search for the answer.

The monologues of Lorna Béthencourt and of Blake Dauthendey transport us to the Combat Zone, a neighbourhood of Boston, peopled (like Abitibi) with singular transients, sensitive whores, and tenebrous melancholiacs. In a setting reminiscent of *Naked Lunch* or *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, Oberlin spends a night with Lorna, a hideous Cuban prostitute whose dark power of attraction evokes the sacramental eroticism of Baudelairean fauna. In a ritual of sorrow and sadism, Oberlin ravishes the grotesque *fille de joie* whom he mistakes for Julie, a Beatrix who haunts his days and nights. In the following chapter, the narrative of Blake the antiquarian deepens the enigmatic aura that surrounds Oberlin. Dauthendey

remembers the hero as a seer and a savant whose mind and baggage hide all of history, including its necromantic mysteries.

The last three narratives, those of Faustin, his wife Béate, and Julie the half-breed are complementary. Using a multiple point of view technique, Chabot gives us glimpses of the Stone Castle and the strange beings who inhabit it. Situated on an island in the middle of an Abitibi river, the Stone Castle is a phantasmagoric *tableau vivant* where reality meets fiction. Faustin becomes the overlord of the Castle and transforms it into a sylvan *lupanar*. Rafts full of sirens sail from castle to sow licentiousness and to intoxicate villagers and woodsmen with protean *démésure*. But the Stone Castle is far from being a *Thélème*. Its shadows of putrefaction breed sadistic instincts. The rape-rut of Julie confronts us with taboos and the cruelest of subconscious phantasmas. The sequence ends with an apocalyptic cleansing by fire and the escape of Julie and Oberlin from the nightmares of Faustin.

Chabot's original invention resists cause-and-effect analysis. The novel is made up of loosely connected, dream-like episodes punctuated by enigmatic grotesqueries and cataclysmic images that could be interpreted as an exploration of the subconscious. The reader is enticed to suspend morality and to listen to dark instincts. In scenes of strong evocative power such as the sexual debacle of Julie, the undisguised libido confronts morbid fears through aggressiveness. Read as a pantomime of our repressed selves, Chabot's creation can be compared with the sado-erotic cryptographs of *nouveau romanciers* such as Robbe-Grillet.

In *L'Eldorado dans les glaces*, the theme of the fragmentation of the self predominates. Despite the inherent interest of the topic, my aim in this study is not to analyze the novelist's contribution to the literature of the double as psychological evidence.² Rather, it is to explore how Chabot exploits the fantastic and manipulates narrative techniques to create a universe where the double can come to life. In this novel, the art of narration and the creation of the fantastic interact. My definition of the fantastic genre is based on the work of Franz Hellens and especially Tzvetan Todorov whose explanations are the most precise and useful.³ The fantastic can be identified as the presentation of the unexplainable so as to induce uncertainty and disquietude in the reader:

In a world which is indeed our world, the one we know, a world without devils, sylphides, or vampires, there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination — and laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality — but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us. . . . The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighboring genre: the uncanny or the mar-

velous. The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event.⁴

In *L'Eldorado*, the uncertainty of the reader is awakened in the introduction; as we close the book, it remains unresolved. All through the narration, the art of the storyteller seduces us and creates a state of pseudo belief, that precarious dimension of the fantastic.

IN CHABOT'S NOVEL, the theme of the double is grounded in the narrative technique. The uncertain authorship of the narration is evidence of the multiplication of consciousness and a source of enigma for the reader. We are constantly asking ourselves: "Who is speaking?" The delicate balance between the uncanny and the marvellous depends on the postponement of an answer. The six narratives that make up the novel are preceded by a foreword that is announced as a commentary outside the text. The author of this foreword casts himself as the editor ("The contents of this book were dictated to me")⁵ and ascribes the six narratives to Oberlin whom he tells us "was a capricious lunatic; or perhaps I should say he was a trifle mad." The editor presents the personage as a case study of the double or of the paradox of the comedian: "It was a question of suppressing his own personality (Oberlin's), of allowing himself to be absorbed by one or more of his characters: he spread himself out amongst them, he extended himself through them. . . ." Oberlin himself plays the role of editor. At the end of the narration which the original editor ascribes to Oberlin, the latter announces that the forthcoming five monologues are transcriptions of his conversations with Lorna, Blake, Faustin, Béate, and Julie. But it is obvious from the style that all these narratives are identical to Oberlin's opening confidences. Did these characters exist? Are they the figment of the hero's deranged mind? (There are several allusions to his precarious mental state.) Are we witnessing multiple manifestations of the double? Or are these voices discrete personalities whose words and thoughts Oberlin reduces to make his own? If the reader listens to the original voice (the author of the foreword with whom one identifies), the condition for the fantastic quickly disappears: "He spread himself out amongst them, he extended himself through them." But what if the editor himself is Oberlin and the foreword is one more manifestation of the double? This is entirely possible, even probable. We can find no difference between the stylistic mannerisms and precautions of the editor and those of Oberlin. The reader is not allowed to decide among any of the above possibilities. He must deal with total uncertainty.

When we read (listen to) a narration like *L'Eldorado*, it is not enough to ask, "Who is speaking?" We must also pay close attention to the psychological state of the narrative voice. The monologues presented as eyewitness accounts and the

artfulness of the narrator(s) exemplify well the axiom that “the more fantastic the story, the more the empirical aura which surrounds the eyewitness becomes desirable.”⁶ In this novel, plausibility is reinforced in many ways. Most of the time, the reader is listening to a voice that convinces him incrementally of its eminent rationality. The speaker conveys a reassuring coherence that anticipates or blunts our logical instincts. For example, several stylistic devices contribute to the web of logical reassurances dispensed for the benefit of the reader. In each narration, the speaker continually interjects adverbs of hypothesis (maybe; perhaps; probably; possibly; etc.) and expressions that display all the precautions of the credible witness (It seemed that; One would have believed that; As though; As if; I even think that; I could hardly believe that; I asked myself if; I must have). In some of the narratives, these interjections of doubt and hypothesis appear in almost every page and they are often accompanied by the conditional mood and/or interrogative formulae: “Was it possible that I had listened to them (guests at the hotel) without actually intending to?”⁷ Paradoxically, this conjectural perception grounded in the tradition of the limited-point-of-view story reinforces the rational tenor of the narration as it undermines it.

The empirical stance does not always predominate in *L'Eldorado dans les glaces*. The fixity of chronology and the cause-and-effect thread of the story is undermined by the minimal credibility of the source of the tale. We are told that Oberlin is a charlatan and we are allowed to believe that he once was a victim of dementia. As Oberlin reflects on the enigmatic testimony of his five witnesses, he muses:

I do not exaggerate when I say that the elaboration of their ideas and the fixation of their visions filled me at times with a sense of euphoria, causing me to shudder in the grip of what was at once illumination and — I won't hesitate to use the word — dementia. And I won't retract the word either, for there was certainly something very demented in my behaviour. But to what extent had it gained control over me? And, having succumbed to it, how far did I manage to extricate myself from it? Ridiculous questions. I won't pursue that line of thought further; there is nothing to be gained from such empty speculation. It would be all too easy to try to explain things away in that manner. The real answers lie elsewhere. Mental strain and a sudden rise in blood pressure were merely the symptoms of my ailments.

In the foreword, the editor-narrator warns us that when Oberlin speaks, “it is as much for his own enlightenment as that of his listener despite the fact that one can never be sure whether these things (Oberlin's tales) are the visions of death, fever, or incurable madness, or merely the objects that lie beyond the window through which he is calmly gazing.” Our guide adds, “He no longer needs to see things as they are, for he has known them all such a very long time, as if his vision of them had preceded their existence and given them life.” When Oberlin assumes the role of editor, he also forewarns the reader that his five witnesses will

be apt to doctor their memories when they speak of the encounters with his double:

As it happened, each of my interlocutors was endowed with a gift of recall that seemed at times suspiciously inspired. Whenever their recollections became vague, faulty or inconsistent, whenever they seemed in danger of losing themselves in the dark labyrinth of the past, rather than tugging at the mildewed threads and rusty springs of their memories, or hurling themselves fearlessly down the dark slopes that stretched menacingly before them, they would return at once to the present and, they would begin to invent, to fabricate, with all the imaginative ardour at their command, raising intoxication at times to the level of exultation and taking infinite delight in the often surrealistic results.

Each character does become intoxicated with words at times and suddenly adopts the tone and the mannerism of the comedian who hides the seer or the sage. As he concludes his own narration, Oberlin warns us prophetically that "To be resolved at all costs to find an explanation for things is to show contempt for life, for it means exalting curiosity above all else." We find similar inspired pronouncements in the other narratives. In the Stone Castle sequence, for example, the references to the words of Simon the Blind and those of Béate (Beata: the blessed?; Béate: the mesmerized?) are similar in style to the incantations of the diviners and the prophetic amplifications of the possessed. The motto of Béate, "Raving madmen come on the scene when wise men have taken their leave," echoes the mystical rapture of the comic imposture of Oberlin, Faustin, and Julie. The intrusions of the voice of a supra- or a sub-reality into the narratives subvert our world of appearances by questioning its empirical foundations and by asserting the primacy of invention over the fragile illusions of logic and the evidence of the physical senses.

The structure and the function of the narrative successfully mirror the content in *L'Eldorado dans les glaces*. The author establishes a meaningful correspondence between the problem of identity and the form elected to portray it. By leaving the identity of the narrative voice constantly in doubt and by undermining its authority, Chabot is able to sustain until the end the uncertainty and the ambiguity already sown in the foreword. It is this pervasive ambiguity that prevents the reader from ascribing the words of the narrator(s) to the hallucinations of a frenzied madman or the suprarationality of a visionary wiseman.

The fantastic also functions as a trope in *L'Eldorado*. As such, it contributes to the dramatic context of the narration. The novel is a tale that seduces our curiosity and awakens our emotions of disquietude and horror. Mystery and surprise supplant the logic of plausibility. Revulsion and anticipation become substitutes for a deficient causality. Each narration anticipates a darkly intimated development, implies an enigma to be solved, an uncertainty to be dissipated. Are the destruction of the former Galician monastery and the passage of Oberlin (a

Galician?) purely coincidental? Who attacked Julie in the dark tower? What is the scratching noise that drowns her in terror? The reader will never know but it is enough that curiosity and emotion entice him to the next paragraph, the next chapter, the last page. The fantastic plays a large role at this level of the narration where it functions as a mechanical device to fuel the interest and the emotions of the reader. For example, in Julie's narration, a canoe of Indians emerges dramatically from the haze as the flames of the burning Stone Castle mingle with the morning fog to form an eerie ether of fire and mist (the *mise-en-scène* itself is fantastic). The intrusion surprises the reader. It also disorients him since the Indians are identified as Algonquians. Our mind instinctively associates the scene and the historical name of the actors with another time dimension, with the days of New France or the Hudson's Bay Company. As soon as the stunning effect of this chronological scramble is achieved, the fantastic quality of the scene is explained away. We are told that the Indians were "on their way to carouse with the girls of the Châteaupierre, to beat the earth with the soles of their naked feet."

Just as often, the fantastic is not dissipated and we must ascribe it to the deranged or inspired state of mind of the narrator. For example, during a stop-over at an isolated train station, Oberlin meets an old man who writes the scientific name of a rare regional plant on his arm (Oberlin's). Interrupting his recollections, the narrator remarks that he never did see the strange plant and that the old man who accosted him was probably a myopic soul who mistook common shrubs for rare flora. Yet, two pages later, we are told that the plant does indeed exist in the vicinity. The truly unsettling element of the event (the old man writing the botanical name of an obscure plant on the arm of a total stranger) is not explained away. Rather, its startling intrusion in the narration is blunted by the elucidation of a pseudo-mystery (whether or not the plant exists in the region). In Béate's description of a forest fire, the point of view of factual documentation is abandoned. Using modes of description that are similar to cinematographic techniques of montage, Chabot freezes time and multiplies it. The village priest is first shown engulfed in a column of fire that swallows him and his spiraling pulpit. Incredibly, he reappears to admonish his flock, to sing a *Te Deum*, to put out the raging inferno. This scene is a vision; time and causality are suspended.

The settings of the story are also constructed from fantastic tropes. Chabot exploits regional geography and history as well as the literary heritage of the fantastic to produce a decor that lends itself to the uncanny and the horrifying. The novelist plants his characters in two real sites whose remoteness from the reader's everyday world provides a fertile ground for historical yet bizarre settings. What better place to situate a fantastic tale than in Abitibi, the region of Québec that lends one of its names to the novel? This isolated expanse of loam and rocks

deep in the Canadian Shield is an Eldorado on ice. At the beginning of this century, myopic politicians and priests promoted the region as "The Golden Land" for the destitute farmers of the province who were searching for a rural paradise. In the 1920's and 1930's, the mineral-rich rocks of the region made it the Klondike of eastern America. In local histories, we could find all the real-life details that inspired Chabot's phantasmagoria: the frontier settlements of Hollywood, Paris-la-nuit (Stone Castle, meccas for squatters, hoboes, Indians, prostitutes, Faustins, Simons the Blind, Julies, . . .); the romantic figure of Père Jean and his mysterious stone monastery; the Galician detention camp of World War I; the Bulgarian movie house manager who brought celluloid adventures to Val d'Or and became its mayor. Likewise, the place names of Massachusetts are remote and exotic for the common reader. The forbidden enclave of Boston's Combat Zone already belongs to the fantastic and the allusion to Lowell refers us to the subterranean imagery world of Kerouac's *Doctor Sax*. Duparquet, Abitibi; Washington Street, Boston; modern courts of miracles for the deviants and the pure of heart who can see. To construct his settings, Chabot also exploits a fantastic mise-en-scène tradition that harks back to the frenetic repertory of the early Romantics. Blake's antiquarian shop, a dark tunnel of dust and rot where the fantastic is almost palpable, echoes descriptions from Balzac's *La Peau de chagrin*. The Stone Castle and Julie's Lantern Tower could be transpositions of the house of Usher's decor or of the Piranesian staging of *The Monk*.

Chabot has absorbed the techniques of the masters of the fantastic genre. He cites Balzac and Hoffman and it is evident that he learned a great deal from Poe, Lewis, Radcliffe, Mérimée, and Potocki. Interesting comparisons could be made between the narrative structures of *L'Eldorado* and *Absalom, Absalom!* or *Aurelia*. Despite a clever allusion to the town of Oberlin, Louisiana, as an explanation of the hero's name, the *doppelgänger* motif sends us back to *Lenz*, Georg Büchner's dramatization of Oberlin's journal on the descent into madness of Lenz, the poet who became convinced that he was Goethe's double.⁸

ABOVE ALL, WE CAN ASSUME, given his deep interest in the lore of rural Abitibi, that Chabot exploits the dynamic tradition of Québec's oral literature. Themes and narrative techniques of *L'Eldorado* that can be linked with the fantastic repertory of formal literature can also be traced back to the popular culture of the Saint Lawrence Valley. The thematic inventory of *L'Eldorado dans les glaces* and the author's vision of things have a great deal in common with this native tradition. The main function of this novel and of the Québec oral repertory is to convey subconscious force and to make manifest their supra-rational values. We can also discover the ascendancy of the native literary

corpus in the narrative technique of *L'Eldorado*, particularly in the point of view of the narrative voice. The Québec oral tale is invariably told by a voice that fulfils several functions simultaneously. The narrator speaks with the authority of the historian but also with the imaginative freedom of the prestidigitator. Despite its fancifulness, the story is presented as the true account of an eyewitness. The authority of the eyewitness is rarely assumed by the actual narrator. It is invested in a second or even a third source and the oral transmission of the story is the basis of its authority and the competence of the narrator. In tales like Aubert de Gaspé (*fils*)' *L'Etranger*,⁹ the author-narrator protests that he holds his facts from *x* who heard them from *y*, the source and the eyewitness who becomes the prime narrator. But it will be seen that this "I" is really the disguised author-narrator. We recognize in this telescopic structure the point of view of *L'Eldorado* and all its opportunities for subterfuge. Also, in the traditional tale, the narrator can present the facts as he establishes them, comment on them, insert self-apologies and other digressions (moral *a parte*, omniscient interventions, inspired visions, etc.) that undermine causality and circumstantiality. We can see at once that the narrator(s) of *L'Eldorado* enjoy(s) the same imaginative freedom as the traditional storyteller.

Chabot's use of the fantastic as a trope can also be traced back to the traditional oral tale of Québec, in particular to the *histoire à faire peur* (spooky story) type. As early as 1840, with Pierre Petitclair's *Une Aventure au Labrador*,¹⁰ we find a transposition of this type of oral tale. Under the guise of a true account (told with the authority of the eyewitness point of view), the narrator retells a story of horror and anticipation punctuated with much dramatic colouring. The details of the *mise en scène* of this story are very similar to the staging of parts of *The Saragossa Manuscript* or similar works but here the fantastic is not functional. At the end of the tale, it is dissipated with much buffoonery. Once again, it is difficult to ignore the similarity in point of view in this type of oral tale and *L'Eldorado* and its author.

Chabot's successful graft of a cosmopolitan literary strain on the dynamic oral tradition of Québec provides a convincing illustration of the theory of Herder on the creation and evolution of national literatures.¹¹ In *L'Eldorado*, the inborn literary stock is not exploited as local colour. Rather, it is intermingled with the cosmopolitan richness of the formal literatures of Europe and the United States. Through this process of cross-fertilization, both strains are invigorated. The very fact that we can attribute the narrative technique, the *mise en scène* and the predominant themes of *L'Eldorado* to an indigenous tradition as well as to a cosmopolitan heritage should be ample proof that Québec literature has evolved enough so that its writers can translate the *volkgeist* of the Saint Lawrence Valley as the distinctive characteristic of a formal literary work.

NOTES

- ¹ Denys Chabot, *L'Eldorado dans les glaces* (Montréal: L'Arbre HMH, 1978). Chabot has published a second novel, *La Province lunaire* (Montréal: L'Arbre HMH, 1981).
- ² See Otto Rank, "The Double as Immortal Self," *Beyond Psychology* (New York: Dover, 1958), 62-121 and Claire Rosenfield, "The Shadow Within: The Conscious and the Unconscious Use of the Double," *Daedalus* (Spring 1963), pp. 326-44.
- ³ Franz Hellens, *Le Fantastique réel* (Bruxelles: Société générale d'éditions, 1967), esp. pp. 47-84; Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic*, trans. Richard Howard (Cleveland/London: The Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1973), esp. pp. 24-40.
- ⁴ Todorov, 25.
- ⁵ The pagination in parentheses refers the reader to Denys Chabot, *Eldorado on Ice*, trans. David Lobdell (Ottawa: Oberon, 1981).
- ⁶ Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (London: Oxford, 1968), p. 258.
- ⁷ "Je les aurais écoutés sans les entendre?" *L'Eldorado . . .*, p. 20.
- ⁸ See Georg Büchner, *Leonce and Lena; Lenz; Woyzeck*, trans. Michael Hamburger (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1972) and Maurice Benn, *The Drama of Revolt: A Critical Study of Georg Büchner* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1976), esp. pp. 194-266.
- ⁹ Philippe Aubert de Gaspé fils, "L'Etranger," *L'Influence d'un livre* (Québec: William Cowan et fils, 1837), pp. 36-47.
- ¹⁰ Pierre Petitclair, "Une Aventure au Labrador," *Le Fantasque*, 2 (2 and 9 novembre 1840) or in James Huston, comp., *Le Répertoire national*, II (Montréal: Lovell, 1848), pp. 150-62.
- ¹¹ For an accurate presentation of Herder's theory, see Gene Bluestein, "Folklore and Ideology," *The Voice of the Folk: Folklore and American Literary Theory* (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1972), pp. 1-15.

THE CALYPSONIAN

Cyril Dabydeen

Say something political for him to hear;
 he will be *kaiso* at once, a *coonoomoonoo* man
 ready to blare out into your ears
 like the gaffing poet with his dialect.

He will next put two and two together
 and come up with verse, and the rhymes from under
 palm tree, with waves singing in the background,