

TIME AND SPACE IN ANDRE LANGEVIN'S "L'ELAN D'AMERIQUE"

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Claire Peabody chante, danse, s'écoule, moelleuse, alanguie, sous la douche, qui abolit le temps et l'espace. . . .

WHEN ANDRÉ LANGEVIN PUBLISHED *L'Élan d'Amérique* in 1972, sixteen years after *Le Temps des hommes*, this technically innovative new novel was not very favorably received by the reading public, and since then it has not received the critical attention it deserves. Many readers have found it disjointed, esoteric, and difficult if not impossible to read.¹ Very few critics have been able to see that beneath the rambling, chaotic interior monologues of which the novel is composed lies a very carefully constructed set of interrelationships between the various points in time and the various places inside and outside Québec to which constant reference is made.² The unordered and seemingly unrelated images, memories and bits of dialogue which make up much of the text repeatedly refer to a limited number of experiences in the lives of the two main characters, Claire Peabody, the Franco-American wife of an American industrialist, and Antoine, a modern Menaud, *maître draveur*. In order to understand the social and other ideological *prises de position* which Langevin takes in *L'Élan d'Amérique*, we must first undertake a detailed study of the use of time and space in this very complex novel. Essential elements of any novel, time and space are of particular importance in all of Langevin's novels, but especially in *L'Élan d'Amérique*, a text in which meaning is produced largely through the symbolic use of historical and fictional events and real and imaginary places.

The major problem which confronts the reader of *L'Élan d'Amérique* is due to the fact that the events of the novel are presented in an order which is far from chronological. As in most *nouveaux romans*, it is the reader who must attempt to reconstruct a reality which involuntary memory and the physical condition of the two main characters have left in the form of recurring images and hazily recollected memories. In the first hundred pages of the novel, it is largely the past

experiences of Claire Peabody which are related, not in any coherent manner, but rather as they are remembered by a depressed, neurotic and inebriated woman. In the chalet in northern Québec which is the focal point of the novel, Claire has, at the beginning of the novel, just made love to Antoine, the *coureur de bois*, and in the shower she begins to recall her past, “livrée à l’eau chaude d’un flux intemporel.”³ Later in the novel, Antoine’s memories are presented in a somewhat more coherent way, despite the fact that he has just had an attack of apoplexy. The twelve hours (approximately) which Claire and Antoine spend together in the chalet is the basic time-frame, the “present,” of the novel, during which the previous events in the lives of Claire and Antoine are presented by the stream-of-consciousness technique, as images, characters and experiences float to the surface of “la vase mouvante de la mémoire.” In an undoubtedly intentional reference to Faulkner, Claire (and later Antoine) abandon themselves to “the sound and the fury” (“au bruit et à la fureur”) of their recollected experiences, which reverberate against “un espace et un temps aux frontières abolies.” Only very careful re-reading of the novel enables the reader to determine the sequence of events and their interrelationships.

In addition to the apparently random order in which the principal events of the novel are presented, the various places in which Claire and Antoine have lived, their respective and very different “worlds,” are not described in any systematic way. For example, Boston (where Claire, the daughter of a French-Canadian mother and an American father, grew up and was educated) and the cottage near the sea where she met David (possibly on Cape Cod) are both associated in her mind with specific memories, such as the elevated train tracks above the house where she spent her childhood or the slate-grey colour of the seaside cottage. Similarly, the two very different settings which Antoine vividly remembers, the corrupt, cosmopolitan city of Montréal and the vast uninhabited expanses of northern Québec, are never actually described. In *L’Elan d’Amérique*, space, like time, is fragmented and distorted by the functioning of the human mind, a psychological phenomenon which most *nouveaux romans* seek to describe through a radically new use of language. What makes it possible to make some sense of the unordered fragments of reality with which the reader is confronted is the fact that the number of specific locations in Québec and in the north-eastern United States where the events of the novel take place is actually fairly limited. It is only the chaotic and disconcerting way in which the places are alluded to and the lack of chronological order in which the sequence of events is presented which make reading *L’Elan d’Amérique* a very different experience from reading Langevin’s earlier, much more traditional novels, like *Poussière sur la ville* (1953). In attempting to understand what Langevin has tried to achieve in this experimental novel, let us begin by analyzing the various aspects of the physical setting of the novel and their relationships with fictional (and historical) time.

Of all the places which Claire vividly remembers, her earliest memories are of the working-class neighbourhood of Boston, where she grew up, the daughter of Rose Greenwood (originally Boisvert), whose family had emigrated from Québec to the northeastern United States to find work in the textile factories. The dark house where she grew up was a place where the economic hardship was a part of every-day life and where freedom was only an ideal. This part of Boston, which Claire remembers well years after she left it to go to college across the river in Cambridge, represents in Langevin's eyes that part of American society which will always fail to realize its share of the American dream. It is very important to the meaning of the novel as a whole that Claire started her life as a victim of the injustices of the American socio-economic system and that even after her marriage to Mr. Peabody, the American industrialist who "adopts" her, her experiences with individual Americans (who often exemplify specific aspects of American society) are always unhappy and ultimately catastrophic.

The physical distance which separates the working-class Boston of Claire's childhood from the intellectual, upper-class world of Cambridge across the St.-Charles River is not great, but the two settings symbolize two very different features of American life. At the age of seventeen, Claire goes to college in Cambridge: "I-park-my-car-in-Harvard-yard." This intellectual hothouse ("serre chaude") has a profound effect upon Claire's personal and social development. It is in Cambridge that she discovers the outside world as well as the world of the mind and learns standard French, the *joual* of her mother's generation having completely disappeared. It is interesting that in *L'Élan d'Amérique* it is the female protagonist, Claire, who is the intellectual and it is the male protagonist, Antoine, who personifies animal instinct and the basic impulses of human life. This situation is in sharp contrast to that in *Poussière sur la ville*, where it is Alain who is the intellectual and Madeleine who is the wild and uninhibited creature of instinct. In addition to her intellectual education, Claire also comes into contact in Cambridge with the decadent America of the 1960's, personified by Allan, a cruel, arrogant, and suicidal sociology student who exemplifies "une jeune Amérique lancée à la conquête de la mort." From this point in her life, Claire will always be associated with that which is decaying in American society. She is permanently tainted with her Americanness — as Antoine tells her, she is "pire qu'une Anglaise. Une Américaine!"

SOON AFTER HER YEARS IN CAMBRIDGE (it is not clear exactly when), Claire's parents are killed in an automobile accident. Like almost all of Langevin's characters, she becomes an orphan, cut off completely from her cultural heritage (she has already been forced to re-learn French as a foreign lan-

guage). It is at this point that she becomes totally Americanized, marries Mr. Peabody, whose company owns the seaside cottage at Suoco Pool (as well as the chalet in northern Québec) and, like so many characters in recent Canadian fiction, goes into "un exil sans retour." It is significant that Claire's marriage to Mr. Peabody is a business arrangement, "un mariage d'affaires." Because of her association with Peabody and her almost entirely American background, Claire embodies all the negative aspects of American culture, particularly as it has influenced Québec society. In her relationship with Antoine, who is the embodiment of traditional Québec values, can be seen an allegorical confluence of the two cultures which does not fail to have disastrous results.

Three months later, Claire spends the month of October (one year before the October during which the last events of the novel take place) in the large slate-grey cottage at the seaside near Suoco Pool. Throughout the novel, constant reference is made to this cottage, to the nearby beach and lighthouse and to the sea. In Claire's mind, the sometimes hazily recollected memories of the weeks spent with her lover David in this seaside resort are of supreme importance, for this time period represents for her all that she has lost: her innocence, her freedom and David himself, who drowned (or committed suicide) in the sea. This fog-bound coastal location is above all a living symbol of purity: "Les grandes marées d'octobre restituent au sable blanc sa virginité des premiers âges." The events which unfold during this first October of peace and happiness repeatedly reach the surface of Claire's consciousness, as she remembers "son premier jour de deuil, en octobre, il y a un an," "un passé tellement proche qu'il est impossible qu'il ne lui appartienne plus." For Claire, this "daughter of the sea," the sea represents a freedom which she can no longer attain. The physical (and spiritual) distance which separates this New England coastal resort from the chalet in northern Québec in which she finds herself in this "second" October, the one in which she has met and slept with Antoine, is the point where time and space converge in *L'Élan d'Amérique* in a highly significant manner. Only a year has passed, but Claire has come a long way, both physically and spiritually, from the happy days of her affair with David.

Thus, Claire now finds herself in northern Québec, in a hunting chalet near a lake, alone with Antoine. It is the second October, the "present" of the beginning of the novel, the point at which the destinies of Claire and Antoine have converged. To Claire, it is as if the continent has shifted beneath her and she finds herself "étrangère et seule avec l'autre, à mille milles de la mer, dans cette cabine de douche. . . ." It is at this point in time and in this place that the final tragic events of Claire's life are to take place. A profound sense of loss of freedom, symbolized by the great distance from the sea, has made Claire more depressed than usual:

[Mr. Peabody] n'avait plus qu'à la priver de la mer et à la mettre au continent sec et à l'eau douce de ce lac où, une fois encore, octobre a laissé couler un dernier or pâle pour le recouvrir aussitôt d'une cendre glacée.

The tundra surrounding the hunting chalet to which she has accompanied her husband on a hunting trip is referred to several times as a sea,⁴ but it is a tideless sea, which cannot wash away the past, as had the North Atlantic at Suoco Pool. Feeling alienated, "une Américaine" despite her French-Canadian ancestry, Claire has come to know Antoine, the other main character of the novel, whose past is also revealed to the reader by the technique of interior monologue and whose experiences are related, much more directly than are those of Claire, to the parts of Québec (especially Montréal) where he has lived and to specific events in recent Québec history.

IN THE CHARACTER OF ANTOINE can be seen the confrontation between two fundamentally different aspects of Québec culture. Brought up to fend for himself as a lumberjack, hunter, and *coureur de bois*, Antoine represents the old Québec, the Québec in which individual physical prowess was the only means of survival in a hostile environment. This archetypal Québec hero, born and raised in the forest, comes into contact with modern, industrialized and Americanized Québec in Montréal, the meeting place of Claire's America and his own, rapidly disappearing traditional values. It is in Montréal that Antoine becomes aware that his world, his Québec, is on the point of extinction and that nothing will ever be the same. In cosmopolitan Montréal, he feels out of place. "C'est quasiment l'étranger," as his brother Hercule puts it. His contemporaries are members of a lost generation, "tous fils des bois, nés vagabonds et libres, . . . marins sans voiles au fond d'un océan sans cartes." In his life time, Antoine has seen a complete transformation of Québec society:

On vous a fait éclater au moins un siècle d'histoire en plein visage. De la culture des cailloux à la société d'abondance en une génération.

Montréal, where Antoine meets the Peruvian exotic dancer María, is both physically and symbolically the half-way point between Claire's urban America (New England) and Antoine's land of freedom, the northern tundra of Québec. As in many of Langevin's novels, space takes on, in the case of Montréal, a symbolic dimension which is one of the keys to the meaning of the novel.

The historical events of the 1960's and 1970's which form the background of Antoine's remembered experiences in Montréal, this great manifestation of the decay of traditional Québec society, are presented in such a way that it is obvious that the tragedy which befalls Antoine, and the moose to which he is often com-

pared, are linked to the tragic fate of contemporary Québec. In *L'Élan d'Amérique*, there is a very close relationship between historical time and the fictional time-frame of the novel. To a much greater extent than in his previous novels, Langevin has attempted to relate the fictitious events of *L'Élan d'Amérique* to the historical events which had a profound effect on the evolution of modern Québec. One of Antoine's earliest memories of the time he spent in Montréal is an obvious allusion to the FLQ bombing of mailboxes in Westmount in the early 1960's: "Une bombe pète dans une boîte aux lettres, chez les Anglais." Antoine's memories of Expo '67 are particularly vivid, as it was Expo which made him aware of the outside world and at the same time of the fragility of *his* world, Québec before the Quiet Revolution :

Tout cela, c'est Montréal, l'étranger, l'endroit où il avait découvert avec accablement et stupeur, l'année de l'exposition universelle, à voir tant de touristes de toutes les couleurs et toutes les langues . . . à quel point lui et les siens étaient fragiles. . .

By far the most important event in recent Québec history which Antoine experienced directly was the October crisis of 1970, when the fragility of his world became even more apparent :

Antoine regarde, écoute, dans une incrédulité totale. Ce sont vraiment des étrangers. Il n'a lu que des mots anglais sur les tuniques. L'exposition universelle à l'envers. . .

Undermined by the massive American influence which Claire represents, Antoine's Québec is, like himself, on the verge of annihilation.

In Langevin's eyes, what has happened to Antoine and to the world he has known is part of a phenomenon which extends far beyond the borders of Québec. In *L'Élan d'Amérique*, the primary function of María del Perú, the exotic dancer Antoine met in Montréal, is to remind the reader that the exploitation and cultural contamination which Québec has suffered at the hands of its American neighbours have also affected the rest of the hemisphere. María, like Antoine, is the victim of forces far stronger than the desire for freedom. María's name is significant not only because it evokes, ironically, the Virgin Mary, but also because the original name of the city of Montréal was Ville-Marie. An additional link between the fates of Antoine and Maria and their respective worlds is expressed in the form of frequent allusions to the condor, the South-American bird which, like the moose, has always been a powerful symbol of freedom. When the moose of the title is killed from a helicopter by Mr. Peabody, Antoine realizes that his world is at an end,

. . . que la ville et ses femelles, si lointaines soient-elles, ont, depuis longtemps, conquis le monde, et que le Pérou, si inaccessible soit-il, et le condor, si haut, et le poisson et Maria, si vifs, n'échapperont jamais aux millions de becs avides. . .

The social and political changes which Langevin is describing in *L'Élan d'Amérique* are also taking place far outside the confines of Québec.

This brings us to what is by far the most moving and dramatic scene of the novel, the killing of the moose with a semi-automatic rifle, an event which shocks Antoine and proves to him that he is powerless to overcome the forces which are encroaching on his world. The death of the moose is presented as an apocalyptic event, signalling the end of the world: "L'échine du mâle se rompt dans un beuglement de fin du monde. . . ." The entire forest seems to react to this crime against Nature, to this transgression of all the laws of the tundra:

c'est toute la forêt qui hurle, des pierres à la cime des arbres, et le bouillonnement du lac qui s'offre tout grand devant le canot dans une chute de vent verticale qui le projette à folle allure sur l'écume noire, toute la forêt qui s'ouvre dans un déchirement de fin du monde. . . .

For Langevin, this event symbolizes everything which has happened to Québec, everything which has transformed Antoine's world into that of Claire. Even more than the October Crisis, this tragic event shows that there can be no turning back — the tide has turned and Québec has lost its battle for cultural survival.⁵

Following the death of the moose, the destinies of Claire and of Antoine are also sealed. Unable to continue to exist, Claire commits suicide by jumping through the open door of the Cessna, and drowns in the lake, seeking the same fate as that of David, one year earlier. From the point of view of time, the novel ends soon after it began, the previous lives of Claire and Antoine having passed before their respective consciousnesses, but the time elapsed being only half a day. It can therefore be said that the structure of *L'Élan d'Amérique* is essentially circular. At the beginning of the novel, Claire had felt relaxed in the shower, "tous muscles relâchés, absente à elle-même, elle flotte dans un temps circulaire. . . ." The fluctuation between past and present and particularly between "this" October and the October of the previous year in New England has revealed to the reader much about Claire's past and the various places in which the drama of her life was carried out. In the case of Antoine, the future is even bleaker than it would have been for Claire. The death of the moose has signalled the end of his world, the end of freedom, the end of the road.

Unlike his earlier, more traditional novels, Langevin's *L'Élan d'Amérique* is a *nouveau roman*,⁶ a novel whose structure is not based on the narration of a linear series of events but rather on the interrelationships between time and space, between specific points in fictional and historical time and real and imaginary places. Traditional narrative forms had sufficed to depict the old Québec, the Québec of Antoine's youth, but to evoke the present situation in Québec and the dissolution of traditional values, Langevin chose a radically new form of fiction.⁷ In *L'Élan d'Amérique*, his vision of the cultural dilemma of Québec in the years

following the October crisis is presented in a form which is at least as disturbing to the reader as his pessimistic view of the problems faced by Quebecers in the early 1970's. Through the symbolic use of the physical settings in which the action of the novel takes place and by creating close links between fictional time ("le temps de la fiction") and historical time, Langevin has produced a powerful novel, whose merits far outweigh the difficulties which the reader initially faces. Like any good novel, *L'Elan d'Amérique* is meant to be read several times, for it is only through re-reading that the meaning of the novel emerges.

NOTES

- ¹ The problems encountered by the reader of *L'Elan d'Amérique* are well summarized in Gérard Bessette's long review article entitled "*L'Elan d'Amérique* dans l'oeuvre d'André Langevin" in *Livres et auteurs québécois* (1972), pp. 12-33. As Bessette points out, "sa compréhension, même sommaire, exige une seconde lecture," p. 12.
- ² In an interesting study of narrative techniques in *L'Elan d'Amérique*, Denis Saint-Jacques points out that in this novel there is much which is not obvious on first reading, "le hasard de la fiction ne pouvant être qu'un subterfuge . . ." (Denis Saint-Jacques, "*L'Elan d'Amérique*," *Études littéraires*, 6, no. 2 [août 1973], 262).
- ³ André Langevin, *L'Elan d'Amérique* (Montréal: Cercle du livre de France, 1972).
- ⁴ For example, "cette mer rocheuse" (p. 106); "la mer plate de la toundra" (p. 181).
- ⁵ As André Gaulin points out, the killing of the moose also has metaphysical implications: "Tous les personnages sont saisis de vertige devant cette fin de monde. . . . Le monde est d'autant plus absurde que l'homme apparaît comme le plus précieux collaborateur de la mort." (André Gaulin, "La Vision du monde d'André Langevin," *Études littéraires*, 6, No. 2 [août 1973], 165).
- ⁶ "La structure de *L'Elan d'Amérique* . . . pourrait en effet être assimilé au nouveau roman, car ce récit rompt avec la convention romanesque." (Gabrielle Pascal, *La Quête de l'identité chez André Langevin* [Montréal: Aquila, 1976], p. 3).
- ⁷ "Avec l'âge, les jeux de la fiction deviennent savants chez Langevin" (Saint-Jacques, p. 257).

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