

FROM ALIENATION TO TRANSCENDENCE

The Quest for Selfhood in Michel Tremblay's Plays

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IN SLIGHTLY MORE THAN A DECADE of sustained productivity, Michel Tremblay created no less than eleven plays set in the working-class environment of east-end Montreal. With the advent of *Damnée Manon, sacrée Sandra*, he announced that the collection was in fact “un premier cycle” and now complete.¹ The series comprises *Les Belles-Soeurs* (1968), *En pièces détachées* (1969), *La Duchesse de Langeais* (1969), *Trois Petits Tours* (1969), *Demain matin, Montréal m’attend* (1970), *A toi, pour toujours, ta Marie-Lou* (1971), *Hosanna* (1973), *Bonjour, là, bonjour* (1974), *Surprise! Surprise!* (1975), *Sainte Carmen de la Main* (1976), and *Damnée Manon, sacrée Sandra* (1977).² Tremblay’s failure to clarify his intentions at the outset has led critics to treat the scripts in piecemeal fashion; and no comprehensive analysis of the cycle has appeared since the playwright underscored its coherence. As a modest and preliminary step in this direction, it may be useful to identify one of Tremblay’s major themes and to examine systematically, if somewhat superficially, its theatrical metamorphoses from the first play to the last.

Fairly early in his career, Tremblay declared his commitment to a theatre dedicated to social inquiry and, implicitly, social animation. His plays, he told Fernand Doré in 1969, were designed as an antidote to “une paresse d’esprit” and “une carence dans le sang” which he found endemic in working-class québécois society. “Le théâtre que j’écris présentement,” he continued, “en est un de ‘claquer sur la gueule,’ qui vise à provoquer une prise de conscience chez le spectateur. Voyons nous, une bonne fois, tels que nous sommes, pour un jour, peut-être, dépasser tout cela.”³ A year later he informed Marc-F. Gélinas more succinctly, “Je fais de la sociologie avec un instrument, le théâtre.”⁴ Like Ibsen, Chekhov, and Sherwood Anderson, he places a relatively small and self-contained society under an artistic microscope. In the grey shabbiness of life on the rue Fabre, strait-jacketed by religious and social sanctions, and the garish glitter of the Main’s (St. Lawrence Boulevard’s) Clubland, with its siren-song of freedom, he discerns

local truths with universal validity. His findings, although uniquely stated and especially germane to Quebec, are reflected and magnified in international Humanities and Social Sciences literature since World War II.

Tremblay's sociological orientation, like that of contemporary sociology itself, evinces a keen awareness of the inter-relatedness of psychological and social processes.⁵ Specific areas of his psycho-social concerns may be usefully illuminated by the work of Freud, Erikson, Adorno, Goffman, and others; but the theories of social psychologist Erich Fromm permit a more comprehensive overview of the cycle, and a remarkably coherent interpretation of the diverse, enigmatic, and unorthodox components of the constituent parts. Indeed, the plays may be read almost as theatrical explorations of the dilemma of the alienated self, both individual and societal, classically mapped by Fromm in his *Escape from Freedom* (1941) and *The Sane Society* (1955).

As imperative a part of man's nature as his physiological drives, Fromm argues, is "the need to be related to the world outside oneself, the need to avoid aloneness."⁶ During the months of foetal development the child's primary ties are to the mother; however, with the moment of birth, an inexorable process of individuation comes into play. "The more the child grows and to the extent to which primary ties are cut off, the more it develops a quest for freedom and independence."⁷ This positive side of individuation is matched by a corresponding and potentially negative aspect — a "growing aloneness." Ideally the forward thrust of individuation should be accompanied by an equivalent development of self-strength; but this, unfortunately, is not always the case.

While the process of individuation takes place automatically, the growth of the self is hampered for a number of individual and social reasons. The lag between these two trends results in an unbearable feeling of isolation and powerlessness.⁸

Faced with the irreversible process of individuation, man has two choices available to him. He may, if he can find sufficient inner resources, resolve the crisis through an "active solidarity with all men and his spontaneous activity, love and work, which unite him again with the world, not by primary ties but as a free and independent individual."⁹ If he cannot do so, the misery of independence without self-strength may oblige him to resort to some form of escape mechanism. Fromm identifies three major types: *authoritarianism*, a strategy which leads the individual to seek "new 'secondary bonds' as a substitute for the primary bonds which have been lost";¹⁰ *automaton conformity*, a state in which he assumes so completely the cultural patterns of his society that he believes them to be of his own choosing; and, as a last resort, *destructiveness*, which has as its end the elimination of the threat or the annihilation of the individual himself.

Tremblay's cycle, begun in the early years of Quebec's Quiet Revolution and completed shortly after the accession to power of the Parti Québécois, may be

read literally as a series of case studies of alienated individuals, most of whom, when faced with the challenge of self-realization, opt to escape from it. At the level of allegory or parable, the cycle depicts and indicts a society (or nation) which rejects its birthright rather than confront the perils inherent in self-responsibility. Tremblay's vision, if bleak, is nevertheless not entirely pessimistic. Among a host of commonplace prisoners of their own fears, he highlights a few bizarre marginals who, through an act of will, break their defeatist patterns and learn to respect themselves and to love others. Their feats of self-conquest, however trivial and grotesque, signpost the route to be taken by a more conventional populace in search of personal and national liberty.

Each of the eight major plays in the cycle contributes uniquely to Tremblay's analysis. *Trois Petits Tours*, three sketches; *Demain matin, Montréal m'attend*, a musical; and *Surprise! Surprise!*, a lunchtime-theatre piece, may be left out of account since they merely confirm the playwright's overall thesis and offer little that is not better expressed elsewhere.

Les Belles-Soeurs, the first play and the cycle's cornerstone, is a horrifying group-portrait of the rue Fabre's alienated females. To the kitchen of Germaine Lauzon, at some time during the 1950's, Tremblay brings fifteen married and single women, ranging in age from adolescence to advanced senility. Throughout an evening spent pasting into books the million trading stamps won by Germaine in a contest, the women bemoan their bondage and powerlessness; yet they remain, in Fromm's phrase, "quite incapable of experiencing the feeling of 'I want' or 'I am.'"¹¹ The seven married women consider themselves victims of sexually-insatiable husbands and demanding families. But the spinsters are hardly more liberated. Des-Neiges Verrette, demoralized by aloneness, orders her life about the monthly visits of a brush-salesman. The ghoulish crones, Rhéauna and Angéline, bondslaves to a death-wish, forge a cannibalistic attachment to each other. Pierrette, although she defies neighbourhood conventions and finds work in a Main nightclub, wins at best a Pyrrhic victory. Intimidated by the prospect of freedom, she becomes the mistress of her employer, only to find herself rejected at the appearance of the first wrinkles. The teenagers, Linda, Lise, and Ginette, are doomed, for want of positive models, to repeat the negative patterns of their elders.

To assuage the anxieties of individuation without self-strength, the women compulsively seek refuge in what amounts to an authoritarian sisterhood: and their individual and collective practice of masochism and sadism, the two major types of authoritarian behaviour noted by Fromm, give the play its heartbeat. The expressionistic soliloquies and choruses are exercises in masochistic release, while the realistic dialogued sequences reveal the sadistic impulse rampant.

The goal of masochism is, according to Fromm, "to get rid of the individual self, to lose oneself; in other words, to get rid of the burden of freedom. . . . To

feel utterly small and helpless is one way toward this aim; to be overwhelmed by pain and agony another; to be overcome by the effects of intoxication still another."¹² The masochistic resources of the rue Fabre women are virtually limitless. Marie-Ange Brouillette, in a speech marked by excremental association, shrinks her significance to wellnigh the vanishing point:

C'est pas moé qui aurais eu c'te chance-là! Pas de danger! Moé, j'mange d'la marde, pis j'vas en manger toute ma vie! . . . Ma vie est plate! Plate! Pis pardessous le marche, chus pauvre comme la gale! Chus tannée de vivre une maudite vie plate!¹³

Rhémauna Bibeau wallows in ill-health to excuse her lack of fulfilment. "J'ai souffert ben plus que toé, Angéline!", she brags in an orgy of self-pity. "J'ai pus rien qu'un poumon, un rein, un sein." Pierrette, unable to reconstruct the fragments of her shattered existence, passively concludes, "Tout ce qui me reste à faire, c'est de me soûler." Similar instances could be multiplied.

Sadism, defined by Fromm as "pleasure in the complete domination over another," allows the powerless individual the illusion of strength, a second means of escape from inner weakness. Sadistic behaviour, according to Fromm, may take three major forms: the desire "to make others dependent on oneself and to have absolute and unrestricted power over them"; "the wish to make others suffer or to see them suffer"; and "the impulse . . . to exploit [others], to use them, to steal from them."¹⁴

Fromm could hardly wish better clinical examples of all three types of sadistic strivings than those offered by Tremblay's females. Thérèse's physical domination of the senile, wheelchair-ridden Olivine Dubuc and Rhémauna's moral subjugation of Angéline are clearly of the first sort. The merciless beatings about the head to which Thérèse periodically subjects her mother-in-law, the abject humiliation forced by the group upon Angéline, and the heartless ostracization of Pierrette belong as patently to the second type. The exploitative form of sadism — the theft of Germaine's stamps — constitutes the play's central action. The social structure of the rue Fabre is founded upon a universal commitment to chronic despair. Germaine's good fortune offers her hope, and thus threatens to destabilize the neighbourhood. The systematic sack of Germaine's dreams, concluded by her despairing cry, "Y me reste pus rien! Rien! Rien!", simultaneously restores her to the masochistic fellowship and vanquishes the menace of change.

In ninety minutes of black comedy, Tremblay explodes two centuries of popular belief, ecclesiastical teaching, and literary myth about Québécois women. Far from being the traditional guardians of religious and moral values, happy progenitors of large families, and good-humoured housekeepers, they stand revealed as malevolent misfits, consumed with hatred of life and of themselves. The corrupt wellspring of female neuroticism, Tremblay argues, infects the whole of Québécois society; and its malign effects are traced in detail in the plays which follow.

Although *Les Belles-Soeurs* may be viewed simply as a psycho-social case study, it yields additional resonance when considered as a political parable. The 1950's era seems to represent for Tremblay the nadir of Québécois self-esteem; and the stifling despair of Germaine Lauzon's kitchen mirrors allegorically Quebec's cultural alienation during the Duplessis regime's final years. The traditional male traits — independence, adventurousness, and strength — are absent. Creativity, nurture, and love — customarily associated with the female — have degenerated into sterile authoritarianism. The ills of Québécois society, like those of the rue Fabre women, derived, Tremblay seems to suggest, less from external forces than a subjective inability to assert its identity, to accept self-responsibility, and to risk moral aloneness. Inexplicably, self-strength failed. The maintenance of Canadian ties offered escape from the fear of freedom; yet the sense of powerlessness evoked by such a choice drove the Francophone community to cannibalize itself in frustration. Tremblay's allegorical intent is transparent in the concluding moments of the play as Germaine's predators triumphantly warble "O Canada." It is devastatingly appropriate that the song which celebrates the demise of Germaine's aspirations to self-respect should be the anthem which symbolizes for Quebec nationalists the victory of hostile dependency over cultural integrity. When Germaine, in a fit of masochistic abandon, dries her tears and lifts her voice with the authoritarian sisterhood, Tremblay's bitterness is almost palpable.

IN *En pièces détachées* Tremblay again returns to the Duplessis era, and now places a rue Fabre family under his psycho-social microscope. Alienated from their individual selves, each other, and the community, the aging Robertine, her daughter, Hélène,¹⁵ and her son-in-law, Henri, vent their frustrations behind closed venetian blinds. Meanwhile, like a Greek tragic chorus, the neighbourhood women, in apartment windows opposite, deride their aloofness and mouth the virtues of conformity.

Robertine, victim of an unhappy marriage and neurotic guilt at the birth of a retarded child, long since sentenced herself to a life of masochistic isolation. Hélène, determined to escape her mother's passive negativism, scandalized the neighbourhood with a brief bout of unconventional behaviour during adolescence; but her quest for freedom was promptly betrayed by her want of self-strength. In a gown of midnight blue, and her hair dyed fire-engine red, she entered a shotgun marriage with the handsome gigolo, Henri, and eclipsed all hope of fulfilment. Her bridegroom, unable to accept the role of family-provider, conveniently suffered an accident and opted for a career of invalidism and fantasy. Over the next fifteen years, tranquillized by self-pity and television cartoons, he revels in the growth of Popeye's muscles while his own virility ebbs away. Meanwhile, Francine,

the child of the unfortunate union, evolves into an adolescent nonentity. Half-heartedly training to become a hairdresser, she is predestined to failure by her total want of self-esteem.

Hélène, the play's protagonist, assumed with her marriage the role of family breadwinner. From humble beginnings as a Kresge's salesgirl, she attains the coveted eminence of waitress at the Main's Coconut Inn; but her reliance on alcohol as a substitute for inner security inevitably occasions her dismissal. Employed in a smoked-meat joint on Papineau Street as the play opens, she smarts at the loss of both status and income. Like the alienated sorority of the previous piece, she seeks release from her pain in a succession of sado-masochistic exercises; and her exertions, as desperate as they are futile, constitute the play's central interest.

In the drama's final episode, Hélène's retarded brother, Claude, now insane and institutionalized, escapes custody and returns home. At curtain-fall, as the household wail, "Chus pus capable de rien faire!", Claude, in a travesty of Frommian self-strength, proclaims his omnipotence. When he wears sunglasses and speaks English, he asserts, "Moé, j'peux toute faire! J'ai toutes les pouvoirs!" Claude's illusions of power, albeit the fruit of insanity, leave the impotent Henri with his mouth a-water.

The authoritarian females of *En pièces détachées* differ little from their counterparts in *Les Belles-Soeurs*, and warrant no detailed comment. It should be noted, however, that the women of both plays, despite their insecurities, maintain their role-functions. Henri and Claude, precursors of a succession of alienated males, do not.

En pièces détachées, a morality play populated exclusively by vices, finds Tremblay's confidence in Quebec's cultural future wellnigh non-existent. Where, he demands allegorically, are the robust male virtues to be discovered? If Henri's sloth perpetuates static despair, Claude's self-delusion invites outright disaster. To seek selfhood through invisibility (which Claude believes is conferred by the wearing of sunglasses) and foreign speech is the counsel of manifest lunacy; yet the madman's formula was consistently adopted by hosts of Québécois, male and female, as a survival strategy from Montcalm's defeat onwards. And the outcome, Quebec nationalists argued, could only be cultural annihilation.

In *La Duchesse de Langeais*, a monologue spoken by a sixty-year-old transsexual, Tremblay depicts another mode of escape from male impotence — the resort to what Erikson terms a "negative identity." This psychological mechanism, close to the ultimate form of masochism, involves the adoption of a role precisely the opposite of the one normally expected. "The history of such a choice," Erikson maintains, "reveals a set of conditions in which it is easier for a patient to derive a sense of identity out of a total identification with that which he is least supposed to be than to struggle for a feeling of reality in acceptable roles which are unattain-

able with his inner means."¹⁶ Tremblay makes little effort to explain the origins of the Duchesse's identity shift. Her femininity is simply there, absolute and irrevocable. Sexually active with males since the age of six, and a prostitute since twelve, the Duchesse can scarcely conceive of a time when she was not female.

The role-models adopted by the Duchesse were not those offered by the drab submissive rue Fabre sisterhood; rather she chose as her exemplars the show-business queens — women like Tallulah Bankhead, Esther Williams, and Mae West — who dedicated their lives to the pursuit of glamour, and used it to buy power. Materialistic prosperity, social status, and international travel, the lodestars of the Duchesse's existence, were readily to be found within the homosexual sub-culture; and a forty-year career as a prostitute and female impersonator brought her a fair measure of all three. But her success did not come cheaply. Her sadistic exploitation of wealthy admirers ("Je suis une mante religieuse, une mangeuse de mâles!") necessitated the systematic dehumanization of both herself and the objects of her conquest. Now drunkenly sunning herself at a southern resort, with only memories of her erstwhile triumphs to solace a desolate old age, she endures the consequences of a loveless past.

Tremblay's account of one man's flight into negative identity as an antidote to weakness is shrewdly observed and poignant. But its parabolic import is infinitely more telling; for the plight of the Duchesse mirrors in microcosm the fate of a society which forgoes its identity in favour of an alien mask. Quebec's virility crisis, Tremblay graphically argues, cannot be solved by an effeminate surrender to North American materialism and its meretricious cultural trappings. Such a course amounts to prostitution and evokes an even greater alienation. Tremblay is not yet prepared to suggest a viable alternative; but his rejection of the ludicrous, and ultimately pathetic, strategy adopted by the Duchesse, and thousands of his Quebec compatriots, is virulent and total.

A toi, pour toujours, ta Marie-Lou sees Tremblay return to domestic life on the rue Fabre, where he now explores with sustained precision themes only outlined previously. In a complex dramatic structure composed of two intermeshed time planes, the sisters, Manon and Carmen, visit together at their childhood home, while their parents, Léopold and Marie-Louise, simultaneously relive the marital hell which culminated in their murder-suicide ten years earlier. The daughters alternately participate in the past action, analyze it in the present, and attempt to assess its influence on their future. Tremblay's intricate and sensitive analysis of the conflict-ridden union of Léopold and Marie-Louise at once clarifies the source and nature of the male-female hostility evident in earlier dramas, and charts its effect on the next generation.

Rue Fabre inhabitants, male and female, are, Tremblay suggests, victims of a societal structure which places a higher value on role-identity than on personal identity. Women are categorized as mothers and housekeepers, and men as fathers

and providers. Words like individuality, will, and self-realization have no place in the local vocabulary. Marie-Louise, pregnant at eighteen, married simply because it was expected of her. She brought to her marriage, in lieu of a sense of selfhood, only her mother's authoritarian complex and an implacable aversion to sex. For her, as for Rose in *Les Belles-Soeurs*, physical lovemaking was an act of violence perpetrated upon a helpless female by a bestial male. "Pour moé, faire ça, c'est cochon!", she insists. "C'est bon pour les animaux." Léopold, equally susceptible to community pressures, accepted the role of family-man, and with it a life of automaton conformity in a factory. Futile rage at his servitude was his only reward. His frustrations might have been somewhat ameliorated by conjugal happiness; but Marie-Louise's neuroticism denied him even this release. To forget his isolation and impotence he retreats to the tavern where he weaves intoxicated daydreams of freedom and choice. His return home, to a renewed sense of despair, invariably prompts an attempt to claim his marital privileges by force.

For both partners, marriage is a sado-masochistic battle with no prospect of victory for either side. Systematically Marie-Louise undermines Léopold's frail self-image, frustrates his sexual urges, and turns his family against him. And he retaliates with renewed brutality. As Léopold's alcoholism lures him ever closer to insanity, Marie-Louise takes refuge in a life-denying religiosity.

And what of the children of the ill-starred union? The relationship of both parents to their young son, Roger, is particularly significant; for it throws valuable light on the identity crisis of the Duchesse and the dilemmas of the protagonists of the next two plays. Not the least of Léopold's miseries is his shame at the inadequate role-model he offers his son; and in a pathetic effort to affirm his virility and confirm his authority, he physically abuses the boy on the slightest excuse. Marie-Louise in turn capitalizes upon Roger's terror of Léopold to forge an unhealthy identity bond with him. Léopold's refusal to allow Roger to share her bed evinces a justifiable fear of the sexual consequences for his son; yet he fails to recognize that the primal source of the threat to Roger's male sexuality, and that of other rue Fabre men, is not maternal domination but paternal alienation. Léopold's daughters pose no threat to his ego and are largely ignored by him. While he looks on with ironic tolerance, Marie-Louise indoctrinates them with her sterile authoritarianism and warped notions of male sexual degeneracy.

The sado-masochistic struggles of Léopold and Marie-Louise inevitably culminate in disaster. If all else fails, Fromm tells us, "I can escape the feeling of my own powerlessness in comparison with the world outside myself by destroying it."¹⁷ And Léopold, in a perverse final act of self-assertion, does just that, and more. While driving with his wife and son on the Boulevard Metropolitan, he crashes the car into a concrete wall. At one stroke he annihilates Marie-Louise, the source of his anguish, himself, the sufferer, and Roger, the heir to his alienation.

Manon and Carmen, who fortunately escape the death-trip, are left, at the ages of fifteen and sixteen, to cope with life as best they can. And their modes of adaptation are very different. Manon passes the next decade in her parents' house, perpetuating the pattern of sexual frigidity and religious fanaticism espoused by her mother. Her authoritarian devotion to God at once mitigates her need for human contact and relieves her of all responsibility for her own fulfilment. Carmen, happily, discovers some vestiges of self-strength; and by a positive act of volition puts the past and its destructiveness behind her. "Chus v'nue au monde dans'marde, pareille comme toé, Manon," she declares, "mais au moins j'essaye de m'en sortir!" Her escape is not a sensational one. She is just a cowboy singer at the Rodeo bar, disguised as an American cultural hero and celebrating an alien mythology. But she has at least taken a first step toward freedom and happiness.

A TOI, POUR TOUJOURS is not only a devastating psycho-social analysis of the traditional working-class Québécois family, but an eloquent allegorical appeal for national emancipation from a destructive authoritarian past. The achievement of self-determination, for Quebec as for Carmen, demands as a first step, Tremblay insists, an exercise of the will. Quebec's initial essays in self-reliance may seem to outsiders puny and even absurd. As Carmen puts it, "Y'en a qui trouvent ça niaiseux, une chanteuse de chansons de cow-boy." "Mais," she continues, "quand c'est ça que tu voulais faire, pis que t'as réussi à le faire t'es ben moins niaiseuse que ben du monde." With Carmen's ingenuous, yet trenchant, declaration, Tremblay permits the first rays of hope to penetrate the hitherto unrelieved darkness of the cycle.

Carmen's assertion of the right to shape her own destiny marks but the beginning of her quest for Fromm's desiderata — love and productive work. Tremblay will report on her progress later. Meanwhile, in *Hosanna*, he undertakes another study of the male identity crisis, a bizarre account of the stresses within a homosexual union. Out of a relationship fragmented by individual alienation, the play's protagonists create a harmony unknown to heterosexual couples in previous dramas.

Claude Lemieux, a rural youth dominated by a mother who preferred to have him homosexual rather than attached to another woman, migrates to Montreal where he assumes the negative identity of Hosanna; and, like the Duchesse, adopts the trappings of American movie heroines to lend glamour and status to an otherwise sordid existence. Her lover, Raymond Bolduc alias Cuirette, has equally thorny identity problems. His sense of maleness is present, if precariously so; but he is unable to accept his homosexuality. Compulsively bolstering his masculine image with leather suits and a motorcycle, he seeks sexual release with transvestites

or the half-invisible males who haunt the unilluminated toilets of Lafontaine Park. Four years of sado-masochistic cohabitation bring Hosanna and Cuirette close to the desperation of Marie-Louise and Léopold. Promiscuous sexual contacts outside their relationship yield no satisfying alternative liaison; yet their life together has become intolerable.

In the course of the play, the illusions upon which both predicate their survival are shattered. Hosanna enters a transvestite masquerade contest dressed as Elizabeth Taylor in the role of Cleopatra. When she discovers that, in collusion with Cuirette, the entire community has donned the same garb, her humiliation is complete. Cuirette suffers a comparable trauma when the city erects lights in Lafontaine Park and robs him of a major source of sexual satisfaction.

Out of the shattered fantasies of both, however, comes a rebirth. Hosanna refuses, despite her shame, to be cowed by her enemies. In an unwonted act of self-strength, she takes the stage in her turn and endures the unavoidable ridicule. Simultaneously she comes to recognize her escapist fancies for what they are. "J'me sus dit," she tells Cuirette later,

"Cléopâtre est un gros tas de merde! Elisabeth Taylor est un gros tas de merde! . . . Ecoute ben ça, Cuirette: j'étais pus Cléopâtre, cibole, j'étais Samson! Oui, Samson! Pis j'ai toute démolie mes décors en papier mâché! . . . Chus t'un homme, Cuirette! . . . Va falloir que tu habitues à ça, aussi."

Cuirette also makes discoveries. At the moment of Hosanna's inner triumph, he realizes that he loves her — not as Hosanna, but as Claude. And her female disguise is no longer essential to their relationship. Claude acknowledges that he is a man; and Raymond accepts the fact that he loves a man. For the first time in the cycle, one human being admits to love for another.

Claude and Raymond are social deviants and will always be so; but marginality, they come to realize, need not imply alienation. Their recipe for relatedness requires as its key ingredient acceptance of, and respect for, one's own individuality. "My own self," contends Fromm, "is as much an object of my love as another person."¹⁸ A sense of self-worth in turn creates for the protagonists the freedom to love others, to engage in what Fromm describes as "an experience of sharing, of communion, which permits the full unfolding of one's own inner activity."¹⁹ The nationalistic moral of Tremblay's fable is transparent. Québécois society may be a North American minority and comparatively powerless, but it need not be alienated. Its salvation lies not in a submissive retreat into negative identity or aggressive displays of mock-virility, but in an acceptance of its uniqueness, and the cultivation of love and respect for itself. Only through confidence in its own integrity can it achieve ties of solidarity with the world outside.

"What matters," Fromm maintains, "is the *quality* of loving, not the object."²⁰ In *Bonjour, la, bonjour*, as if to test the implications of Fromm's assertion, Tremblay explores the plight of a man who discovers that the object of his love is his

sister. So compelling, however, is his need for love, the ultimate remedy for alienation, that he defies society's strictest taboo in order to attain it.

The mother of the play's hero, Serge, died when he was barely out of infancy, leaving him to the mercies of a father (Gabriel) who, like Léopold, sought in the tavern escape from family duties and the tedium of factory labour. Three older sisters — Lucienne, Denise, and Monique — became surrogate mothers to Serge and his youngest sister, Nicole. From early childhood the senior sisters encouraged an excessive intimacy between their youngest siblings; and, with adulthood, the relationship ripened into incest. Serge, at twenty-five, and Nicole, at thirty, finally confront the long-term implications of their involvement, and decide to separate to contemplate their options. After a three-month European vacation, Serge returns with his mind made up.

In a series of encounters during Serge's first evening at home, Tremblay juxtaposes the socially-accepted authoritarian destructiveness of the rest of the family with the socially-reprehensible happiness of the illicit lovers. Gabriel, Serge's father, withdraws into deafness. The aging aunts, Albertine and Charlotte, measure out their days in illness, self-pity, and mutual hate. Serge's elder sisters are equally maladjusted: Lucienne seeks solace for an unhappy marriage in a succession of young lovers; Denise eats incessantly to compensate for spiritual hollowness; and Monique downs tranquilizers with abandon to dull the pain of loneliness. If this be normality, Tremblay demands implicitly, what is deviance?

Fortunately Serge eludes the authoritarian toils which enmesh the rest of the family, and stoutly resists any attempt to entrap him. He doubts neither his male identity nor his heterosexuality. Such anxieties as he has are prompted less by the unorthodox object of his love than by his concern for the quality of his feeling. His attachment to Nicole was initially, indeed, predetermined; but as an individual possessed of reason and freewill he refuses to be the creature of blind authoritarianism. "C'est vrai que j'ai pas eu ben ben le choix," he tells Lucienne. "C'est vrai que toute la famille m'a jeté dans les bras de Nicole . . . mais c'est-tu ça que j'veux vraiment?" After long and careful thought, he concludes that he loves Nicole not out of compulsion but volition; and to reject his chance for happiness would be foolhardy. By the deliberate exercise of reason and will, the brother and sister assert their right to choose their destiny and their readiness to accept the consequences of their decisions. Inevitably a high price must be paid for flouting social convention; but their happiness justifies it. "J'me sacre de ce que le reste du monde peut penser," Serge insists, "nous autres on est heureux pis c'qu'on ressent l'un pour l'autre, si c'est une maladie, c'est une maudite belle maladie!"

"Productive love," according to Fromm, "always implies a syndrome of attitudes; that of *care, responsibility, respect and knowledge*."²¹ The productive love of Serge and Nicole animates not only their own relationship, but extends beyond it to the ailing Gabriel. Out of Serge's own struggles for fulfilment comes the

capacity to empathize with his father's alienation, to forgive his past blunders, and to accept responsibility for his future. Serge's cry, "Popa, j't'aime" (according to Tremblay, "la première fois dans le théâtre québécois qu'un fils dit à son père qu'il l'aime")²² marks a felicitous resolution of the male identity crisis which haunted earlier plays.

The nationalistic import of Tremblay's incest metaphor needs little explication. His impatience with the alienated destructiveness which passes among Québécois for normalcy is self-evident. The play is a clarion call to renounce negativism, and, through the deliberate employment of reason and will, to seek love — if only within the cultural family. Such a love, far from being aberrant, is positive and productive. It allows not only fulfilment today, but reconciliation with yesterday. To say "Popa, j't'aime" to the past is to understand it, to forgive its errors, and to accept responsibility for the future. It is, in short, to discover a sense of historical identity. Tremblay's use in the play's title of the salutation, "Bonjour," a word spoken in Quebec both at meeting and parting, signals at once the birth of love and the death of alienation.

In *Sainte Carmen de la Main* Tremblay resumes the tale of Carmen, who achieves at last Frommian freedom only to be martyred by the social forces which thrive on human bondage. This, the penultimate play of the cycle, simultaneously celebrates Tremblay's belief in man's potential for self-realization and betrays his fearful conviction that in modern society the odds are heavily against its fulfilment.

Over the years since *A toi, pour toujours* Carmen's career on the Main has prospered; and in recent months she has journeyed to Nashville to improve her vocal technique at the expense of her lover, Maurice, proprietor of the Rodeo nightclub and underworld kingpin. As the play opens, she is about to make her second début at the Rodeo, an event eagerly awaited by local transvestites, prostitutes, and other denizens of the area. She begins her performance with translations of Western "hits"; but toward the end switches to songs she has written herself about the lives of Main-dwellers. Her lyrics are hymns to the value and beauty of the human spirit, and the redemptive power of self-strength. As Sandra, the transvestite, and Rose Beef, the prostitute, put it, "Carmen a dit qu'au fond de moé j'étais forte!" Overnight Carmen becomes a heroine to her public, and a material threat to Maurice, whose lifestyle is supported by the very weaknesses Carmen decries. When she refuses to heed either her lover-employer's pleas or warnings, her career as social animator is cut short by two shotgun blasts; and her place is filled by her rival, Gloria, a purveyor of Latin American schmaltz.

Arguably Carmen is not perfect. She is naive, over-confident, and impulsive; worse still, her alliance with a brutal hood makes her the indirect author of her own destruction. Yet the splendour of her love redeems all faults. It now goes beyond the love of self or a particular individual and embraces an entire society. "If I love," writes Fromm, "I care — that is, I am actively concerned with the

other person's growth and happiness. . . . I respond to his needs, to those he can express and more so to those he cannot or does not express."²³ Carmen cares profoundly; and her art (Fromm considers art a "prototype" of productive work) is the inevitable and happy effect of her altruism. "Avec ma voix j'ai décidé d'essayer d'aider la Main à sortir de son trou," she announces to Maurice.

Si y faut y montrer à respirer, j'y montrerai à respirer . . . si y faut toute y montrer j'y montrerai tout c'que je sais, même si c'est pas ben gros . . . Y m'écoutent, moé! Y m'aiment, moé! Pis moé aussi j'les aime!

This consummate synthesis of love and productive work, in an environment implacably hostile to both, at once precipitates Carmen's ruin and vindicates her claim to sainthood.

As an object lesson in humanism, *Sainte Carmen* functions admirably; but at the level of allegory it disappoints. According to Tremblay, the piece was designed as a parable dealing with "la place de l'artiste dans la société";²⁴ and when read thus, it smacks more of self-conscious posturing than passionate conviction. Can the playwright be seriously suggesting that the socially-committed artist inevitably suffers destruction at the hands of hostile authority? Such has not been his lot at any rate. Nor can one give much more weight to his simplistic conclusion that escapist art (represented by Gloria) must prevail over higher forms (epitomized by Carmen). Does Tremblay believe in art as an instrument of social reform at all? His decision to kill Carmen before her work comes to fruition conveniently evades the question altogether.

Sainte Carmen completes Tremblay's exploration of man's need for Frommian "rootedness" and "relatedness"; and, in the final play of the cycle, he turns to a third human drive noted by Fromm — the impulse towards transcendence. *Damnée Manon, sacrée Sandra*, a deeply-moving personal statement, voices the playwright's recognition that for him, as for Sandra, "La survie tout court, ça se peut pas. Y faut que ça soye accompagné par quequ'chose, la survie . . . Quequ'chose d'enveloppant pis de chaud!"

The protagonists are familiar figures from previous plays. Manon, the God-ridden recluse of *A toi, pour toujours*, and Sandra, a transvestite who is mentioned in *Hosanna* and appears in *Sainte Carmen*, occupy houses facing each other on rue Fabre. Both lived in the area during the period of *En pièces détachées* when Sandra was the small boy, called Michel. Exactly the same age, they developed a close childhood friendship, the nearest thing to love either was to know. Now about thirty, living in physical proximity but long estranged, each pursues in isolation her own mode of transcendence. Sandra views herself as gross flesh, the passive instrument of an omnipotent sexual drive, and seeks transcendence through erotic fantasy in the play's early sequences. Manon considers herself pure spirit, the yielding plaything of God, and pursues a metaphysical union with the Deity through

faith and unrelenting self-abnegation. In the course of the drama each protagonist is increasingly reminded of past links with the other; and both come to recognize themselves as alter egos. Simultaneously their transcendental obsessions begin to intermingle. Manon's spiritual devotion is tainted and hindered by sensual distractions, while Sandra's mirages take on religious overtones. In an orgy of narcissistic spirituality, Manon attempts to repress her memories and the call of the flesh; but she meets with indifferent success. Meanwhile Sandra, having dismissed her exotic reveries, enters imaginatively into Manon's consciousness. It becomes apparent that Sandra has it in her power to give or withhold from Manon the spiritual ecstasy she craves. In an act of love, born of childhood memories and a recognition of her own imperfect efforts at transcendence, Sandra gratifies Manon's desire.

"Closely connected with the need for relatedness," writes Fromm, "is man's situation as a *creature*. . . . Being endowed with reason and imagination, he cannot be content . . . with the role of dice cast out of a cup. He is driven by the urge to transcend the role of the creature, the accidentalness and passivity of his existence, by becoming a 'creator.'" And to create "presupposes love for that which one creates."²⁵ If one cannot love and create, one may seek transcendence by less desirable means. "To destroy life," Fromm reminds us, "makes me also transcend it."²⁶ Manon's inability to love and create leads her to withdraw from productive human contact into an authoritarian and ultimately self-destructive kind of transcendence. Sandra, although a victim of negative identity, is saved from Manon's fate by her power to empathize and love her fellow creatures. In boyhood Sandra sensed the want of colour in the lives of her playmates, and created Batman fantasies to cheer them. Today, in empathetic conversations in the street, she shares the misery of the same children now grown older. Sandra's decision to allow Manon her religious rapture, a similar act of love and creation, renders her "sacrée"; while Manon, bent solely on narcissistic fulfilment, is damned in her solipsist heaven.

Considered as allegory, *Damnée Manon, sacrée Sandra* is a sensitive and open-hearted account of the playwright's own passion for transcendence. Sandra is clearly Tremblay himself; indeed, prior to her adoption of a negative identity, she bore his name. His plays, like Sandra's Batman fantasies, are not only efforts to animate a society mired in despair, but also attempts to transcend through creativity the sense of having been created. Manon's awareness of her origins in the will of the author ("Croyez donc en moé! Même . . . si . . . j'ai été . . . inventée . . . par . . . Michel") echoes Tremblay's recognition of his own plight; and in her successful flight into transcendence he vicariously realizes his own aspirations. "Monte! Monte! Monte!," he cries. "Pis tire-moé avec toé! . . . Moé aussi j'ai été inventée!" Manon's mode of transcendence cannot, of course, be his, however attractive it may seem at times. His lot is to attempt through art to transcend his

existential pain in a gift of hope to his society. Sandra's imaginary speech to the rue Fabre housewives metaphorically reveals Tremblay's own frailty, his oneness with the alienated products of his creation, and the impulse that gave them life.

Aie, c'est moé, regardez, vous rappelez-vous de moé? . . . C'est moé qui organisais les pique-niques au parc Lafontaine ou ben donc au parc Laurier. C'est moé qui hantais . . . les ruelles, le soir, pour vous faire peur! Si vous saviez! Si vous saviez comme c'est moé qui avais peur! . . . J'vous ai toujours possédés à contretemps mais si vous saviez . . . si vous saviez comme j'vous aime!

It is upon the transcendent vitality of his love that Tremblay predicates any hope he may have of moral or artistic salvation.

When compared with the best of contemporary plays dealing with human alienation, it must be admitted that the *Les Belles-Soeurs* cycle pales alongside the work of Miller, Albee, Beckett, Pinter, or Genet. Tremblay's commitment to nationalistic allegory inevitably obliges him to sacrifice breadth of social observation, complexity of psychology, and catholicity of appeal. His weakness as a world-class dramatist, however, is precisely the source of his power as a Quebec playwright. His dramas were not designed as universal theatrical statements, but as works of social animation for a specific place and time — Quebec during the Quiet Revolution. And no one understood better, or articulated more poignantly, the national psychology of the period. His recreations of particular segments of Quebec life were authentic and revealing; and his allegorical message was apt, comprehensible, and effective. The impact of his theatre upon Quebec's cultural evolution over the past decade defies measurement.

But Quebec is forever changing. Already his social analysis is being criticized as outdated.²⁷ Yesterday's revelations have become today's clichés. In another decade, one suspects, most of the plays in the cycle will have been consigned to Quebec's cultural history cupboard. Their potential relevance to the rest of Canada, however, remains to be explored. If as a nation we are to understand Quebec's present, we must comprehend its past. And its recent past, characterized by a desperate struggle to replace authoritarianism, negative identity, and destructiveness with self-respect, love, and transcendence, is nowhere better encapsulated than in the *Les Belles-Soeurs* cycle.

NOTES

¹ Adrien Gruslin, "Michel Tremblay achève un premier cycle," *Le Devoir*, Feb. 26, 1977.

² Dates are those of first productions. For further details see "Biographical Checklist: Michel Tremblay," *Canadian Theatre Review* (Fall 1979), pp. 47-51.

³ Fernand Doré, "Michel Tremblay, le gars à barbe sympathique," *Le Magazine Maclean* (June 1969), p. 10.

- ⁴ Marc-F. Gélinas, "Je pense en joual," *Le Magazine Maclean* (September 1970), p. 46.
- ⁵ See Introduction to *Mental Illness and Social Processes*, ed. Thomas J. Scheff (New York: Harper & Row, 1967).
- ⁶ Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1964), p. 19.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 28.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 31.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 36.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 141.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 142.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 152-53.
- ¹³ References are to the following editions of the plays: *Les Belles-Soeurs*, Leméac, 1972; *En pièces détachées*, Leméac, 1972; *Hosanna suivi de La Duchesse de Langeais*, Leméac, 1973; *A toi, pour toujours, ta Marie-Lou*, Leméac, 1971; *Bonjour, là, bonjour*, Leméac, 1974; *Sainte Carmen de la Main*, Leméac, 1976; *Damnée Manon, sacrée Sandra*, Leméac, 1977.
- ¹⁴ Fromm, *op. cit.*, p. 144.
- ¹⁵ Although this character is given the name Thérèse in the edition from which I quote, she is designated Héléne in other editions. She is also referred to as Héléne in *Damnée Manon*.
- ¹⁶ Erik H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: Norton, 1968), p. 176.
- ¹⁷ Fromm, *op. cit.*, p. 179.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 115.
- ¹⁹ Erich Fromm, *The Sane Society* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1964), p. 31.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 32.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 33.
- ²² Martial Dassylva, "Tremblay: une pièce plus froide et plus subtile," *La Presse*, Sept. 21, 1974.
- ²³ *The Sane Society*, p. 33.
- ²⁴ Martial Dassylva, "Une pièce inspirée de la tragédie grecque," *La Presse*, May 13, 1978.
- ²⁵ *The Sane Society*, pp. 36, 37.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 37.
- ²⁷ *Les Belles-Soeurs* was considered to some degree out of date as early as 1973. See Albert Brie, "Les Belles Soeurs — subissent-elles l'outrage des ans?" *Le Devoir*, Oct. 13, 1973.