

FRANCOIS HERTEL

The Unprecedented Voice

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FRANÇOIS HERTEL as a poet reveals the evolution of Quebec thought in this century. His poetry, published between 1934 and 1967, largely antedates the Quebec revolution. He was among the first in the province to question traditions. In the 1940's, his voice was unprecedented and unique. Hertel could not at that time remain freely in Quebec to express his thought. Some twenty years later, when his attitudes were widely appreciated, he returned to Canada. It is the purpose of this article to examine the development of Hertel's thought through his poetry, both for its own sake and as an indication of the Quebec revolution.

Born in Rivière-Ouelle in 1905, Rodolphe Dubé was educated in Trois-Rivières and ordained a Jesuit priest. In 1947, he departed for France where he has remained except for extensive travels and a recent sojourn in Kingston, Ontario. His move to France took place at approximately the same time as his abandonment of the Jesuit life. All of his works have been published under the pseudonym, François Hertel. The source of the name is explained:

Mois, je me suis rebaptisé Hertel.
Ce furent des espèces de hobereaux de chez nous,
Des nobles qui étaient aussi coureurs de bois.
Je leur ai pris leur nom; car ils avaient négligé
d'avoir des enfants;
Et il ne faut pas qu'un beau nom se perde.¹

The original Hertel is commemorated also in the poems "La Verendrye" and "Le luth des vieilles rues".

Hertel published four books of poetry before 1947: *Les voix de mon rêve*, *Axe et parallaxes*, *Strophes et catastrophes*, and *Cosmos*, and four others, published

between 1948 and 1961, may be considered as forming a second group. They are entitled *Quatorze, Mes naufrages, Jeux de mer et de soleil*, and *Poèmes européens*, of which the final poem is "Adieu à la poésie". Many of the previously published poems are reprinted in the final volumes of poetry: *Anthologie 1934-1964, Poèmes perdus et retrouvés*, and *Poèmes d'hier et d'aujourd'hui 1927-1967*.

Les voix de mon rêve (1934) presents fifty poems under the divisions: "Voix de chez nous," "Voix des soirs," "Voix intimes," "Voix sculpturales," and "Voix de la fantaisie." Those titles indicate the fundamental attitudes and interests of the poet. His feeling for the homeland illuminates the first group of poems. "Voix des soirs" consists of poems expressive of the quiet, meditative, and sometimes melancholy mood of evening. The poems of "Voix des soirs" and "Voix intimes" often rise to the level of prayer. The author's most personal thought concerning his relationship to God, his work as educator, and his aim as poet, inspire the section "Voix intimes". In the poems of "Voix sculpturales" is revealed the poet's sensitivity to the beauty of poetry, of music, of dream, but especially of nature. The serious manner of the first four parts of the book is varied in "Voix de la fantaisie". In those poems, even though the subjects may be characterized by gentleness or nostalgia, there is an attempt at gaiety and humour, particularly in form. The neatly designed form of this first volume and of each poem was never repeated by Hertel. Nor did he ever again write poetry with the same measure of objectivity, and control of imagination and emotion as are found here.

Axe et parallaxes (1941) is dedicated to Paul Claudel. In the dedicatory poem, Hertel's aim is defined:

Moi, je voudrais plutôt passer au delà de l'image
Epurer le phantasme au creuset de la relation
Décanter l'idée.

The search for intellectual meaning lies within Hertel's concept of poetry as defined in "Axe ou art poétique". In the poem, "Tristesse", there is a plea for pure knowledge: "Je veux le don total, la nue vision et l'étreinte de l'Idée solide." The poems of this volume treat the author's most serious thoughts: the belief in man's total dependence of God, the mystery of the trinity, the Eucharistic presence. The poem, "Dialogue" reveals an understanding of grace and leads to "Supplique de l'homme", a prayer for purification and salvation. "Prière à la vierge", a prayer only in its conclusion, is an attempt to know Mary, the inspiration of art and devotion through the ages. Divine and human creation are discussed in "Journal". "Parallaxe d'une même étoile" treats of the bond between

two widely separated people who regard the same star. The dramatic pieces also tend to describe and reveal a theme: destiny in "Soir ultime", suffering in "Notre-Dame des Laurentides", the nature of man in "Géométrie de Montréal". The final poem, "Prière pour les philosophes", prays for a continued awareness of man as a creature of God.

The same serious and religious attitude pervades *Strophes et catastrophes* (1934). Its first poems recall the patriotic and personal poems of *Les Voix de mon rêve*. A repeated theme is the regret for lost youth. Hertel expressed little desire for life beyond the time of youthfulness.

L'homme qui doit vieillir, qu'il s'exile peut-être
Qu'il renferme sa mort dans un coffre d'airain.

The theme of the beauty of youth is stressed through this book. The poems on Jesuit saints are written from the knowledge and ideals of Hertel's own youth. The last section of the book is addressed to the young poets of Quebec. Hertel speaks to them and counsels:

Rien n'est plus beau que toi, jeune poète. Reste
donc en grâce avec la nature et avec Dieu,
Et que Celui-ce te mène à ton glorieux calvaire!

The drama "Jeunesse" stresses the similarity between youthfulness and art. The whole is founded on the belief in the youthfulness of God who is shown in "Viste du Dieu" to the ultimate source of human creativity.

Cosmos (1945) shows the height of Hertel's philosophical poetry. The opening lines are full of strength and conviction:

Dans la maturité de mon âge
Parfaitement sain de corps, et d'esprit me croyant sain,
J'ai voulu d'un effort puissant de tous mes muscles
Exprimer;
Dire ce que n'avait pas été dit encore sur le Cosmos
Grâce à une manière unique de la concevoir.

"Cosmos" presents the whole history of the universe, beginning and ending in God. Somewhat in the manner of the previous book, *Cosmos* explores meanings, describes experiences, delineates values. The human experiences of solitude, of the world, of self, and of art are touched in successive poems. The moods of the poems vary from anguish to ecstasy as Hertel ranges mentally through a gamut of human experience which culminates in the final pieces entitled "Petits poèmes

à la gloire du sport” and “Prière pour les artistes”. Sports are described as “reflets d’un divinité joueuse” by which man is raised “vers Celui qui est l’auteur des techniques et des harmonies”. Sports, characterized by technique and harmony, resemble art by which also man is drawn to God in the manner described in “Prière pour les artistes”. In this concluding poem of the book, Hertel describes the artist as a man chosen to suffer, to give of himself, and to offer his work in homage to God.

Totally suggestive of the talent of the author, these four books yet do not clearly indicate the direction to be followed in his maturity. From the delicacy and charm of *Les Voix de mon rêve*, he moved to the meditative and philosophical work of *Axe et parallaxes*, then to the aesthetic and didactic notes of *Strophes et catastrophes*, and finally to the breadth and elevation of *Cosmos*. There was yet no quarrel with himself. The poems of charitable love, of humble faith, and of personal holiness were not to be repeated.

THE SECOND MOVEMENT of Hertel’s poetry differs in subject matter and in mood from the work of his first period. In the publications of 1948 to 1961, strength of imagination, trenchancy of feeling, and the incisive truth of human experience are developed and illustrated. Hertel’s prose works of this time reveal the direction of his intellectual development toward atheism and a cosmic humility.

Quatorze, the first book of his second period, reproduces many of the early works found suitable and adequate in form according to the theory of poetry described in the Introduction to that book. The elements of poetry are defined as a personal rhythm and an original conception of the world. Through poems of nostalgia, of imagination, of aesthetics, Hertel presents his understanding and creation of life. The new poems, added here, indicate a change in Hertel’s thought concerning man. His view had been generally understanding and appreciative. His aversion, when it was expressed, was directed only against the errors of man as, for example, in “Cosmos” and in “Saints martyrs du Canada”. In *Quatorze*, however, he wrote: “Entre les animaux, l’homme est le moins humain.” The imagery becomes hard and metallic to convey this new and disillusioned view of mankind. Certainly, that attitude and understanding had been present in “Le surhomme” but here there is no counterbalance of “Le point de vue de Dieu”.

That harsh view of humanity results in a turning away from mankind and a concentration on the self in *Mes naufrages*. The soul is in a state of wretchedness,

of despair, of exile. The intensity of suffering leads to a state of inversion so that satisfaction is found in the underworld, in the black silence, under the black sun. The damnation is accepted as the bitter fate of the unhappy and rejected. The state is most horrifying as it is active, strong, and vengeful. This book contains Hertel's strongest poetry, poetry of the anguish of the inward struggle.

The poems of *Jeux de mer et de soleil* represent a continuation, in a more concentrated form, of the themes of the inevitability of destiny, of the absurdity of life, of the vileness of man. Continued also are the images of ocean and of night, and the mood of bitter loneliness. The self-deprecation, which had been apparent from Hertel's earliest expression, is exaggerated until there is no respect for or value of the human state. "En pleine nuit" expresses a damnation of all mankind. Awareness of the condition is obliterated in sleep, in intoxication. Yet, there remains, as in the poem "A ma mère", an understanding of the worth of one human being and a hope for unity, for the end of loneliness, in some future life. For poetry of this density of thought, there is necessitated, as described in "Art poétique", strong and controlled verse. Through it, the author hopes to be delivered from the monster imprisoning him.

This whole second movement of Hertel's poetry is poetry of exile, poetry of Europe, work which does not have the security, physical or spiritual, of his home. The last volume of this second group of poems, *Poèmes européens* repeats the nightmare poems of *Mes naufrages*. Thus the book opens with a mood of harshness and bitterness. In the face of the suffering of life, death becomes an acceptable alternative. The desperation grows until all sense of reason and sanity is doubted. The only attitude found possible is that of epicureanism as described in the poem "Sterilité". That sense of sterility leads to the decision against poetry:

J'ai plus de cinquante ans. Halte-là, mon beau vice!
 Ne faisons plus d'efforts au-dessus du normal.
 Fermons bien les volets sur l'univers complice,
 Car le bien qu'on impose est la source du mal.

There remain, if not the pleasure of writing, at least those of travel and discovery. Such subjects inspire the poems of Europe and Africa. All the sources of enjoyment by this time lie outside the self. Concentration upon himself or upon human nature leads only to revulsion. He must find beauty and exultation externally, and he does so magnificently in "Hymne à l'univers".

The poems of this second period of Hertel's writing reveal a complexity and concentration not found in the early work. The statements of poetic theory indi-

cate Hertel's deep consciousness of himself as poet. The forms are designed and justified in accordance with the development of his thought. In *Quatorze*, the sonnet form provides perfectly for the poems of description and reflection. In that book, Hertel also gave, as he demanded of any poet, his concept of life. It is hard and disillusioned. Unbearable, it could not be expressed simply or in prescribed forms. Hence, there are the poems of desperation of *Mes naufrages*, written in free verse. Some relief from the personal anguish was certainly found in the art of poetry as it is described and practised in *Jeux de mer et de soleil*. There was yet, though, no experience of peace. Only a sense of acceptance, as expressed in *Poèmes européens*, was to come. That ability to live and enjoy was to increase as it was directed outward to a glorification of the world and of the whole universe. In his first books, Hertel began from the security of faith and tradition which he began to question. The second group of poetry volumes show him rather beginning from disillusionment and desperation, and proceeding to a position of epicureanism and cosmic humility.

While Hertel's final three volumes of poetry give very little new material, they yet reveal concisely the development of the author and his own evaluation of his work. In *Anthologie 1934-1964* are conserved selected poems from all the previous publications. Given in chronological order, these poems show Hertel's first traditions and reflections, the increasing disquietude and inward suffering, the final view of man within the universe. *Poèmes perdus et retrouvés*, containing selections from *Poèmes européens* and *Jeux de mer et de soleil*, as well as previously unpublished work, shows the pleasure, the torment, and the final balance of feeling experienced in Hertel's development towards his personal philosophy of life.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF HERTEL'S ATTITUDES may be summarized. From the beginning, there was a tone of melancholy. It became the bitter anguish of human solitude. The early tender feeling for mankind, particularly children, was replaced by an awareness of the inhumanity of man. The love of the homeland as expressed in the poems of *Three Rivers* gave way to a poetry of Europe and of the whole universe. The choice was one of anonymity over identity. The first poems expressed a clear reasonableness about life as being totally directed toward God. In the second period, that faith is lost, and there is only a feeling of the absurdity of life. Poems of historical or philosophical description were replaced by descriptions of personal inward suffering. The first book concluded with light humour; the last, with a statement of epicureanism. Poetry, which was at first

created as an offering to God, was explained and justified, and finally abandoned.

All such changes indicate the growth of individual thought, necessary in human maturity. Never to be regained was the original innocence. Yet, a greater peace than here expressed might be hoped for. Of all the mysteries that Hertel probed, suffering is not one. In the later poetry, it is masked with gaiety. Thus Hertel remains, in the end, without a philosophy of rest or happiness.

The examination and rejection of tradition and the subsequent formation of new thought characterizes the development of a people as well as an individual poet. In this sense, there was first suggested an analogy between the Quebec turmoil of the 1960's and the intellectual evolution revealed so succinctly in the poetry. The poetry of François Hertel forecasts and illuminates the growth of his native province from the early traditionalism to the self-questioning of the mid-twentieth century.

NOTES

- ¹ François Hertel, *Axe et parallaxes* (Montreal: Les Editions Varietes, 1941), p. 10.

A FIRST TIME

Joan Thornton

Our relationship shagged brilliant ice
Beard of the Arctic nights crenellated
Dreams beneath eyelids half closed ecstasies
Ice melting between our legs trickles cold
Exciting between my hands love cupping
Your sacrament drink it down to its dregs
Lapsed on this mattress soaking with our
Combined sweats white sheets rustle of words
Articulate unspoken feelings
Only fingers & thighs talk Memory
Sprouting ears all over my skin soaks
Up impressions retinal shifts sweet
Oscillations oiled Loves ball bearings
A World over frees this amazing shudder