

THE UNENDING CYCLE

Leonard W. Sugden

IN HIS CRITICAL ESSAY on the poetry of Emile Nelligan included in *Une littérature en ébullition*, Gérard Bessette has pointed out that, besides being able to appreciate each poem for its intrinsic value, one may also study the poems together as a single integrated story. They constitute the drama of the poet's own life and tragic breakdown, and contain, for Bessette, all the essential elements of a French Canadian myth.¹

The meaning of *le Cycle*, Bessette's most recent novel, is greatly clarified by his comments on Nelligan: the title not only represents the mutations in Quebec life from generation to generation, it suggests at the same time that this novel is identifiable with the Quebec myth, it is a symbolic recreation, a remodelling and commentary on this myth, and, what is even more interesting, it is an ominous prophecy of things to come.

That the author had intended to project into *le Cycle* the main facets of a mythology is clear from its very structure. Since it is written in the form of a number of interior monologues presented in a virtually insignificant sequence, each monologue appearing to illustrate a different set of values and attitudes of mind, it is difficult to locate this novel at any one stage in the evolution of French Canadian prose. When we read the first chapter, which is comprised of the infantile ramblings in the mind of tiny Jacot, we feel we are in the presence of one of those perverse children found in the pages of Marie-Claire Blais or Réjean Ducharme. At the same time, when we come to the third monologue, which contains the tormented reflections of the mother, Vitaline, with her intense religiosity, combined with a fierce desire to maintain her children within the traditional flock, we have the impression that we are not far removed from the turn of the century world of Laura Conan or Louis Hémon. It is true, of course, that many French Canadian works of fiction present the everpresent conflict between younger and older generations, but few succeed, as does *le Cycle*, in sustaining so well the basic tensions between them. *Le Cycle* appears thereby to incorporate within its structure a number of phases in Quebec's spiritual evolution.

If Bessette's preceding novel, *l'Incubation*, is a deep, powerful and highly

imaginative commentary on the modern world, *le Cycle* is an even more ambitious analysis which is limited in its interest to French Canadian society. In *l'Incubation*, for the first time, the author had incorporated into his work the methods of the French New Novel and shown the strong influence of the "conscious stream" method pioneered by James Joyce and Virginia Woolf.² In his latest work he continues the same trend, though now, rather than portraying a single subjectivity, he endeavours to present the thought processes of seven different individuals, all members of the same family. The relative truth that we, as human beings, can know about any one of these personalities is revealed to us through the reflections of each of the six other participants. If we add to this the fact that, by employing this structure, Bessette proposes to encompass some four generations of family relationships, if, moreover, one considers the numerous relatives, friends and associates who are also brought into focus in these seven monologues, we have an idea of the breadth of perspective that the author attempts to capture in his novel.

In *le Cycle*, Bessette demonstrates once again his interest in probing the most intimate thoughts hidden in the obscure recesses of consciousness. His very original undertaking has been to fix in a vivid, abstract and highly stylized form the spontaneous movements of the human psyche. To this end, he has made a certain number of modifications to the already quite effective techniques used in *l'Incubation*. After the early novels, *la Barre* (1958) and *les Pédagogues* (1961), which had been written in accordance with the conventional percepts of Flaubertian realism, Bessette had moved in evolutionary sequence to the first person narrative in *le Librairie* (1960) and from thence to the more completely subjective style of *l'Incubation*. In *le Cycle*, as the title suggests, the course of his work comes full way around. This last novel is an original effort to integrate within its structure the different qualities of his previous fiction and to establish thereby a superior form of realism.

Le Cycle contains the usual Bessettian themes: a pervading pessimism, irremediable situations, human ineptitude and defeat, the preponderant human motives of lust and money, the grossness of sexuality and man's physical repulsiveness, oedipal relationships and the sublimatory origin of ideological drives — and, last but not least, the monotonous and useless tasks imposed on many by a mechanistic society. The rapprochement between literary invention and scientific theory so apparent in French prose in the latter half of the 19th Century is here vigorously introduced into French Canadian letters. Freudian concepts strongly enhanced by the principles of environmental and physiological determinism

form a systematic framework on which the narrative is built. There is also a greater effort on the author's part to reproduce the subtleties, chaotic movements and utter crudity of notions welling up from the subconscious.

WHILE IN *l'Incubation*, Bessette had advanced his own personal rendition of the perennial theme of love, in *le Cycle* he turns to explore a subject which is equally universal to human experience: the significance of death. The focal point of the entire story may be traced to the passing of the father of the family in question, Norbert Onésime Barré. The central scene is a funeral parlour. It is at the moment when the mother and children are gathered around his coffin to pay their last respects that the author lets us enter the inner domain of each, and we learn what meaning this death has had for them all individually.

We learn that when Norbert Barré met Vitaline Francoeur some thirty-seven years before, he had been an enthusiastic suitor as well as an impeccable and very mature citizen already established in insurance. It is for this reason that the girl's family pushed the match and Vitaline refused another young beau who stirred her heart, but who was not as "solid" as Norbert, twenty-five years her senior. It was from this loveless marriage that the Barré family came into being and from it stemmed all the unhappiness that these pages retrace. The unbridled Sophie, mistress of the Barré's rebellious son, Julien, is rather justified then in claiming that, "la famille il n'y a rien de plus dangereux."³

Steadily worn by his routine debates with clients and by quarrels at home, reduced to silence by years of nagging, exacerbated by rancour after his estrangement from his wife's bed, Norbert Barré, insurance agent, had slowly weakened and finally, morally and physically broken, had succumbed to his fate at seventy-three years of age: death from arterio-sclerosis. Partly due to the fact that he was of gentle character and never manifested any qualities of leadership or of parental authority, his first son, Roch, had been a failure in most respects and his other son, Julien, had become a beatnik and a revolutionary. It is the intelligent Roch who observes that "Dans n'importe quel couple . . . il y a toujours un des deux partenaires qui domine." Between Vitaline and Norbert, it had been the husband who proved to be the weaker.

But Norbert Barré had been truly loved: his children all mourn him sincerely and his wife, Vitaline, recognizing that the years had built a certain affection, is tormented with grief, remorse and repentance at his passing. After all, the

defeats he had known were largely beyond his control and we must look further to uncover their source. The complexes and personality attributes (or impediments) of each of these individuals must here be ascribed to Freud's well consecrated formula: the behaviour of the adult is directly related to the events of early childhood, for there is a mysterious life going on beneath conscious experience — a secret life which, moreover, determines consciousness itself. For this reason, we must examine the question of another death hovering over the story, a death even more pertinent in its effects on the lives of all these persons.

Vitaline had known all her life an intense love, or, might one say better, an oedipal bond, with her father, a strong and domineering figure. At the same time, when only very young, she had experienced the wrathful violence of a fiercely devout and puritanical mother who had one day caught her exploring anatomical differences with her tiny brother, Joachim. And so we find years later a mature Vitaline, as pious as her mother, but deeply neurotic and with a subconscious fear of the flesh. In her marriage, her intimate relations with Norbert were considered as "mes devoirs d'épouse"; her husband's early ascendancy over her soon fading, the enormous father image began to find a poor reflection in her daily partner. Three children came: Anita, a happy first arrival, Roch, stubborn with his mother and more attached to his father, and Berthe, who, as a further burden, was relatively undesired. Then, the cataclysmic event occurred: the maternal grandfather became partially paralysed and Vitaline Barré, shocked and crushed, fell into a torpor of grief which was only intensified by his death. The stout and passive Anita was now beyond the emotional needs of early childhood, but Roch and Berthe, pale and emaciated, who arrived during this painful period, experienced deeply the bane of the unwanted.

Norbert's meeting with Vitaline had been a fatal accident, his relations with her being, from the start, more or less determined by events out of her past of which he was completely unaware. As is subtly shown in the novel, Vitaline's unconscious quest after her father's demise was that into her life there should enter once again, "dans l'outré-tombe une immense et fantômatique figure". The atmosphere in the home became unbreathable. Vitaline, for her part, was like a pale and lonely phantom harassed by the incessant presence of an attentive husband and three children. In the interim, however, the messiah came, but in the form of another son, Julien. It was this boy, always fondled and admired, who became the model, the chosen one for his mother's devouring ambitions. But Julien, resentful of an aging father who was of little guidance, could only find a solution to this suffocating mother love in revolt and escape.

The eldest daughter's life appears to have been subconsciously patterned on rivalry and emulation of the maternal image. Anita, too, marries at eighteen a man much older than herself, Charles Bachand, whom she easily dominates and scarcely loves. Thoroughly sated with affection during her infancy, she knows no great emotional disquiet later. Seven years after their union, Charles dies in sexual congress (trying to give the mother hen a larger brood) and she is left with two offspring plus independant means. Thenceforth, the only visitor to her home is the vicar Aurélien Latour. Her affective needs are now sufficiently sublimated by religious fervour and her admiration for this attentive priest. Bessette hereupon satirizes mercilessly the Quebec clergy and religion as a whole (much as he had done in treating mother Vitaline's piety and hypocrisy). Neither Anita nor Aurélien seem to understand the real motives for his frequent visits: "Cesse de rêvasser Anita vaniteuse mets fin à ces folies d'adolescente jamais ton nom (pardonnez-moi mon Dieu) jamais n'apparaîtra en grosses lettres sur la couverture d'un livre content-toi de faire ton devoir d'aider humblement l'abbé Latour à faire son devoir." The passage where Anita awaits in horror the departure of the dawdling abbé while her adolescent daughter unconsciously discloses some of her fleshly charms is one of the funniest in the book.

Roch Barré resembles in certain regards Bessette's apathetic anti-hero in the 1960 novel, *le Libraire*, but with Anita's brother there is no question of an assumed detachment; his defeat in life is total and irreversible.⁴ Roch lives in an attic hovel where he spends his time drinking bourbon to calm his nerves and poring over blueprints for the profit of the British American Company. His natural talents are undermined by his past. Roch is the first to hurry to his father's deathbed; his affection for this man has been his most lasting bond.

Berthe has been the least loved of all the Barré children, which doubtless drives her to become the sexual slave of the bestial Roberto. Berthe had criticized her husband, Albert Laverdure, and treated him contemptuously, for the ex-athlete had failed to satisfy her craving for affection. Even at school, as a miserable, lonely, neurotic adolescent, Berthe had succumbed, in search of relief from her frustration, to a lesbian affair. Now, since Albert has fled, her attention is almost completely absorbed by the uncouth and hawklike Italian. It is Roch who understands the real reason: "Il la tient par la peau".

But the death of Vitaline's father not only blighted the lives of Roch and Berthe, and confirmed Norbert Barré's moral destruction; it also visited its curse upon the following generation in the person of the infant, Jacot. Between the strain of her job in an office, under the tyranny of a vicious female accoun-

tant, and her own emotional problems, Berthe had little time for her son. Jacot's hatred of his father's replacement and his own distress are expressed in obsessive activity of his excretory system; his refusal of self-control is the one way he has of punishing his elders and getting attention.

The various inter-relationships between these brothers and sisters are carefully delineated in respective monologues. The most striking device the author utilizes in order to illustrate these complex psychological reactions is also one he shares with Henri de Montherlant. By the use of "alternance", the French author presented that fundamental duality whereby any thought entering into consciousness simultaneously suggests its converse. In other words, it is not at all illogical that Gaétane should sneer one moment at Berthe's shameless conduct and then suddenly declare: "Pauvre Berthe la protéger lui donner de bons conseils la délivrer de ce corsaire." Roch sardonically refers to Julien's mediocre intelligence and his socio-political beatnik behaviour stirred by his unseemly girl friend, Sophie, then proffers instantaneously: "il a peut-être raison il est peut-être plus libre que toi Roch Barré dessinateur squelettique." For Bessette, as for the heroes of Montherlant, man's interior drama springs from this basic ambiguity; it is the keyboard of fatality.

Julien is held by the Flemish Sophie Teunebroeker in much the same way as Berthe by her Roberto. To begin, Julien was a refined young man, adulated at home and gaining top marks at school, but then he began to frequent a slovenly crowd of drifters and dope-takers. There he met Sophie, an unkempt European leftist, with her expressionless face, her dirt and her limitless sensuality. In their abject apartment, she and Julien lie on their grubby mattress, making fierce love and discussing how they plan to revolutionize society, destroy bourgeois capitalism, overthrow a claustrophobic system which breeds hate and misunderstanding. In complete incomprehension, Vitaline prays, "qu'il oublie pour une fois la contestation la révolution les assemblées socialistes fascistes maoïstes séparatistes qu'est-ce ça veut dire toute cette salade."

In a portrayal which recalls Huxley's *Brave New World* or Orwell's *1984*, Bessette pushes to an extreme what could possibly be the traits of a new order. His early solidarity with resurgent Québécois unionism is now tempered with much irony and scepticism. Julien and Sophie in their revolt aim to thwart a system which has bred such irretrievable creatures as Anita, Roch and Berthe. Julien's soul cries out for vengeance against a society which has made of his father's life a living hell. In his eyes his brother Roch's work as draftsman for the Anglos symbolizes his people's plight after a hundred years of injustice. Yet the

suggestions of a new fascism are evident in his attitude, for he accepts an unswerving self-discipline in the name of the cause. The leader, Stanislas, stands on the podium beneath the fleur-de-lys flag with his enormously muscular legs spread so as to form an indestructible X. Dressed in shining black nylon and high leather boots, he roars his message through loudspeakers to an infatuated crowd propelled towards the mystique of a new Calvary.

The most appealing figure in the novel is Gaétane. Delicate and intelligent, this teenager has been deeply affected by the death of her father, but it is her older brother, Julien, in whom she finds an enthralling masculine image. The love of these two borders on incest, but Gaétane is really an innocent girl passing through a crucial moment in her life. She is in the process of questioning her environment, forming her opinions. Her inner debate is perhaps the heart of the novel, for the side she and those of her generation fall on will determine the future direction of her homeland. She, for example, is going through a very serious religious crisis: "Dieu existe il est là-haut quelque part (non il n'est nulle part il n'existe pas il se fiche de nous)." The other characters, except for Gaétane and Julien, may be seen as lost souls sold to the system of money and conformity to bourgeois rules. The young girl has the intelligence to question such values. She is drawn to her brother, Julien, but as yet she does not yield to the temptation of complete intellectual revolt. For what do people like Julien and Sophie, the rebels of the younger generation, have to offer in place of what has been? Bessette's satire makes it quite clear in the naming of the great leader towards whom the new youth aspires, Stanislas Auguste Casavant — or as it may be deciphered: Stanislas Box-of-wind.

THE MYTHICAL QUALITIES of *le Cycle* are unmistakable. Once again, as in many a French Canadian work, we have the story of a family and its symbolic struggle to survive against forces lying within as well as outside itself; we observe, moreover, among the members of this family a characteristic "complexe d'aliénation",⁵ or deep-seated fear of estrangement, whether on the individual, social, cultural, or political plane. In all of Bessette's novels, as in much recent Québécois fiction, the characters live in the closed milieu of a modern city away from nature's balm: in other words, they are threatened as well with alienation from their natural heritage.

At the moment of Norbert Barrés death, the family's disintegration is imminent. The established order is definitely breaking up. Yet the thwarted Vitaline

and her children still express inwardly a nostalgia for reconciliation and reunion. Roch says of his sister Berthe: "pourquoi ne pas tenter avec elle un rapprochement pourquoi ne pas l'appeler ou même aller chez elle." Julien overtly refuses his family and all it stands for; he is the only one not to come to the funeral. However, we discover that he has in fact prowled around the Funeral Home, only to flee at the last instant from his father's corpse, the religious observances and the presence of the others. A moment of penetrating insight reveals to the young rebel exactly what he has been doing subconsciously through his political initiatives: "est-il possible qu'un antique implacable Oedipe antéconscientiel ait même alors au fond de moi crié réclamé exigé vengeance) la révolution le socialisme la revanche prolétarienne damnés de la terre unissez-vous qu'eussent-ils perdu et Stanislas-Auguste Casavant Carlos Ramirez Sophie Teunebröker de quoi les aurais-je privés en quoi les aurais-je trahis si je m'étais alors jeté à genoux ou simplement approché de ce lit."

In *le Cycle*, Bessette delivers his prophetic vision. French Canada's survival is strongly threatened. (That Gaétane's daily routine at school should involve the English tongue is another symptom of this.) But fanatical leadership will go to all ends to see that the threat does not materialize. The present may be filled with disorder and one may wonder what form the new order will take. The signs portend that the future will not be "august". The "Casavants" are at work and, for the sake of a race and a language, the pattern of a rich and beautiful cultural heritage may be extinguished. In any case, it is vigorously implied that the tragedy of the lives of such people as the Barrés cannot alone be ascribed to the evils of a system and an establishment. Catastrophe is, after all, often the necessary consequence of human relations, the tragic fates of men being frequently irremediable. The design of the Quebec myth, of which *le Cycle* is a further representation, is itself founded upon the primordial instincts of the human psyche, impulses that may be traced back through all the great legends of man's past. Human nature cannot be fundamentally altered. Although ideological fervour may interrupt its course for a time, the cycle will go on.

NOTES

- ¹ Bessette, *Une littérature en ébullition* (Montreal: Editions du jour, 1968).
- ² Glen Shortliffe, *Gérard Bessette l'homme et l'écrivain*, "Conférences J.A. de Sève," Université de Montréal (Montréal: Thérien Frères, 1960), p. 16.
- ³ Bessette, *le Cycle* (Montreal: Editions du jour, 1971), p. 91. Henceforth references to this work will be designated by the first letter of the title.
- ⁴ Shortliffe, *op. cit.*, p. 18. In his conference on Bessette, Glenn Shortliffe points out

how Hervé Jodoin, protagonist of *le Libraire*, embodies a modern phenomenon which he calls "schizoidism." Finding the various demands which contemporary society thrusts upon the individual difficult to bear, the "schizoid" learns to develop a psychological distance, a sort of built-in non-reaction, towards all persons and objects making up exterior reality. Jodoin's bizarre indifference recalls Camus' famous hero, Meursault, in the novel, *l'Étranger*.

- ⁵ Yvon Daigneault, "Menaud maître-draveur devant la critique 1937-1967," *Livres et auteurs québécois 1969* (Montréal: Editions Jumonville, 1969), pp. 248-262. In his article on Félix-Antoine Savard's novel, Yvon Daigneault states as his principal thesis that "Menaud serait l'expression pour nous des grands mythes fondamentaux de l'âme humaine." Daigneault further mentions how Gilles Marcotte considered *Menaud* as being essentially "l'illustration du complexe d'aliénation des Canadiens français" (p. 257). While *Menaud maître-draveur* and *le Cycle* are exemplary, all Québécois fiction may be said, in general, to follow this pattern.

THE DEAD CHILD

P. K. Page

I dreamed the child was dead
and folded in a box
like stockings or a dress

I dreamed its toys and games
its brightly coloured clothes
were lying in the grass

and I was left behind
adult and dutiful
with ink instead of blood.

I could not bear the grief
accommodate the loss.
It was my heart that died.

But wakening I saw
the child beside my bed
'Not dead, not dead!' I cried
and startled by my voice
and fearful of my glance
the child ran off and hid.

(*Poems from Melanie's Nite-book.*)