

TWIN SOLITUDES

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“ONE OF THE FUNCTIONS and responsibilities of literature,” says the American critic Marius Bewley, “is to define nationality in the act of describing or dramatizing it.”¹ And when one considers French Literature, American Literature, English Literature, indeed any of the distinctive national literatures, it is clear that Bewley’s statement is correct. These literatures have accomplished the subtle definition of nationality. However intricate and mysterious the process of recognition, citizens of the various nations are somehow able to recognize themselves as such. Language, philosophy, theology, history, politics, and a variety of other things undoubtedly make their contribution, but in the final analysis it is literature which has up to now provided the definition. Key writers, either consciously or unconsciously, have created their works within particular mystiques. Which is not to say, incidentally, that these works are necessarily regional, or chauvinistic, or even lacking in universal significance, but simply that they have been distilled through the complex apparatus of national myth and national sense of identity. One thinks of Shakespeare, Mark Twain, Chekhov, Molière or Robert Burns.

Then one thinks of Canada and Canadian Literature; and a number of somewhat troubling speculations come immediately to mind.

What about Canadian Literature? Has it succeeded in even suggesting a definition of Canadian identity? If so, what are the aspects of this definition? If not, is it because of a weakness in the literature? Have the key writers not yet emerged? Have they gone unnoticed? Or could it be that there is no distilling apparatus of positive Canadian myth and sense of identity adequate to condition our creative writers? Supposing such an absence, is it detrimental to the creative process? Moreover, and what is probably the most vital question of all, in a country with

two distinct languages and literary traditions, neither one manifestly dominant over the other in terms of production or quality, each one apparently isolated from the other, are we to presume two independent definitions of the same sense of identity, or rather two separate national mystiques each with its separate definition; or, in line with certain pessimistic comments of the last few years, would we be wise to presume nothing at all?

This paper will be an attempt, through parallel analyses of principal themes in the twentieth-century French-Canadian and English-Canadian novel, to shed some light upon these questions. It does not, of course, intend to provide conclusive answers to all or any of the questions posed, but is conceived rather as a prolegomenon to further study.

Of the thousands of novels which have been written in French and English Canada, there are only a few, it would seem, which have had any kind of impact on any segment of the national consciousness. For particular attention I have selected those novels which seem to me to be the most appropriate for the socio-literary study proposed, but I have also tried to select from among those works which have lasting artistic and thematic qualities. When expedient, I shall provide English translations of the French, attempting to preserve what I think is the tone of the original.

Besides brief observations, such as the series of commentaries published in *Le Devoir littéraire* in December 1959, a short article by Naïm Kattan in the forty-second issue of *Liberté*, a pioneering study by Thomas Farley of Ottawa, and remarks by Edmund Wilson, very little appears to have been written in recent years about comparative Canadian Literature. Yet when placed side by side, each of the literary traditions of Canada becomes far more meaningful than when considered apart. For that matter, there are fruitful comparisons possible between Canadian and American Literature, and between Canadian and Russian Literature, but these will have to await attention. If I may submit a conclusion before I have properly begun, when French-Canadian and English-Canadian novels are studied together, it becomes evident that there are many significant parallels, parallels which loom all the more fascinating as one discovers the improbability of inter-influence. It also becomes evident, interestingly enough, that a good number of the accepted differences between the cultures of French Canada and English Canada do not in fact exist. For both English-speaking and French-speaking Canadians, major writers included, are guilty of taking a small segment of the other society, albeit shaped into mythic reality, and using it as a substitute for the complex whole.

BOTH THE French-Canadian and English-Canadian novel have gone through a remarkable evolution in the last forty years or so. During this evolution, three major interlocking themes have emerged:

- 1) The Land and Divine Order;
- 2) The Breakup of the Old Order;
- 3) The Search for Vital Truth.

In French-Canadian Literature, the first of these major themes — “Land and Divine Order” — is illustrated by what has been called *le roman paysan* or *le roman du terroir*. Louis Hémon’s *Maria Chapdelaine*, of course, is the best known of this group of novels and has undoubtedly had the greatest influence. The climax of the tradition came in the late thirties with the publication of Félix-Antoine Savard’s *Menaud maître-draveur* and Ringuet’s *Trente Arpents*. *Menaud maître-draveur*, which reproduces passages from *Maria Chapdelaine* throughout its text, is not of the same stature as either Hémon’s or Ringuet’s work. In a way it resembles Ralph Connor’s *The Man from Glengarry*, although it falls far short of the latter in convincing description of the river drives. It has none of the detail characteristic of Connor, such as the loggers all standing around attentively, waiting for the telltale snap as MacDonald Mhor bends a man over his knee, about to break his back. On the other hand, it does not degenerate into a Sunday School tract, as does Connor’s book. Nobody, including his adored daughter, converts Menaud into a lover of all men. He remains a psychopath, obsessed with the idea of “the enemy.” In Savard’s work there is a certain originality of style, incorporating Canadianisms into the prose in a manner which perhaps foreshadows the stylistic experiments of a few very recent French-Canadian novels, experiments which we shall consider later; but *Menaud maître-draveur* is a prose poem rather than a realistic novel. Viewed as a prose poem, its sentimentality, subjectivity and distortion are less detrimental to the value of the work. *Maria Chapdelaine* and *Trente Arpents*, on the other hand, are realistic novels of high merit and penetrating insight.

It has been recognized for years that Louis Hémon succeeded in crystallizing fundamental values of French-Canadian rural society through the characters in the novel *Maria Chapdelaine*. There is a kind of masochism in the father of the family, who will not allow himself to remain on a farm once he has brought it to the point of productivity, but must move again into the wilderness, dragging his family along with him. The mother Chapdelaine, who has always secretly yearned for an easier life, remains loyal to the end, when wasted from years of

toil and deprivation she gives up and dies. Just before her death, which the father obviously finds more annoying than tragic, he tries to cheer her up by saying: "You will die when the good Lord wants you to die, and I don't figure it's time yet. What would he do with you? Heaven is full of old ladies, but here we've got only one, and she can still do a little work, sometimes."²

Maria will be like her mother. She has moments of doubt, especially in connection with the handsome adventurer François Paradis. When he is lost in the bush, she takes the appropriate measures. She knows that if one repeats a thousand *Ave Marias* on the day before Christmas, then asks a favour of God, barring extraordinary designs on the part of the divinity, the favour will be granted. Unfortunately, God does have extraordinary designs in this particular instance, and François freezes to death in the forest. At first, it is hard for Maria to accept. "Christ Jesus, who hold out your arms to the unfortunate," she says to herself, "why didn't you deliver him from the snow with your pale hands? Why, Holy Virgin, didn't you permit a small miracle when he stumbled for the last time? In all the heavenly legions, why couldn't he have had an angel to show him the way?"³ But Maria's doubts do not last long, for like her father and mother she knows the deep satisfaction of being sure. As Hémon put it: "Oh! Certainty! The contentment of an august promise which dispels the terrible fog of death. While the priest was performing the holy rites and his murmur mixed with the sighs of the dying woman, Samuel Chapdelaine and his children prayed without lifting their heads, almost consoled, free from doubt and worry, certain that whatever happened was according to a pact with the divinity, which made the blue heaven sown with stars of gold an authentic blessing."⁴ Maria, then, can turn down the offer of Lorenzo Surprenant to go with him to the United States, and accept a continuation of her mother's life by marrying her neighbour Eutrope Gagnon.

Throughout the novel *Maria Chapdelaine*, one is aware of the two major thematic ideas, the land and the divine order. In fact, these ideas merge into one, for the land, with its changeless cycle of seasons, its absolute permanence, its mixture of cruel severity and arbitrary sustenance, becomes symbolic of the accepted divine order. The more a person is in harmony with the land, therefore, the more he is in harmony with God. Or perhaps I should say with a particular concept of God, considering the stern, unremitting nature of the land in question — the Jansenist, Calvinist, Puritan concept of God.

Turning to Frederick Philip Grove's *Our Daily Bread* and Ringuet's *Trente Arpents*, one finds the same thematic ideas of the land and the divine order;

although both books also introduce the beginning of the dissolution of the old order. As a matter of fact, *Our Daily Bread* and *Trente Arpents*, the first published in 1928 and the second in 1938, are so strikingly similar in theme and plot and even in certain scenes, that one wonders if Philippe Panneton had ever read Grove. On the other hand, the two books are entirely different in detail, in atmosphere, in technique, so that in the highly unlikely event that Ringuet did borrow certain ideas, he subjected them thoroughly to his own creative process. *Trente Arpents*, it must be pointed out, is a far better novel than *Our Daily Bread*. Its rhythmic prose, its skillful use of colloquial diction, an accurate representation of French-Canadian *joual*, is vigorous and captivating, in contrast to Grove's stiff, often lumbering style. Ringuet had a genius for selecting the kind of small detail which brings a character alive, engaging the imagination and sympathy of the reader. When Phydime Raymond, for example, visits Euchariste Moisan to negotiate for Moisan's half of a small wood, which he desperately wishes to buy, the ancestral Norman propensity for circumlocution is illustrated in a manner worthy of Maupassant at his best. Raymond explains that he has come to see if the sick cow is getting better. Then the conversation, between drags on their pipes, proceeds to diseases in general, the weather, the ice road which is becoming dangerous, the elections. On his way out the door, Raymond inquires about the fence bordering the two properties and who should repair it that year. Then he, who is the one wanting to buy Moisan's half of the wood, offers to sell his half to Moisan, observing that it isn't worth ten dollars to him. And Moisan, who has not the least notion of buying land, says that such a purchase might be a good idea. And on they go, each somehow divining exactly what the other has in mind. Compared to Ringuet's technique of characterization, Grove's is stark and clinical. Nonetheless, considered as an artistic whole, despite its obvious shortcomings, *Our Daily Bread* does make a deep impression upon the reader, an impression of magnitude of vision. It may well have as permanent a place in Canadian Literature as *Trente Arpents*.

The parallels in the two novels are manifest. Both stories concern a man obsessed with the idea of building a dynasty upon the land, an Old-Testament type of dynasty. Both men, Euchariste Moisan and John Elliot, have loyal, long-suffering wives, each of whom was chosen to bear children and each of whom brings four sons and six daughters into the world. Alphonsine, Moisan's wife, dies delivering her last child, while Martha Elliot is a victim of cancer of the womb, making them both martyrs to their husbands' obsessions. Like Chapdelaine's wife and Alphonsine, Martha has always secretly harboured a sense of

frustration, but she is the only one of the three who gets a chance to express this long denied feeling. In a fantastic scene, perhaps one of Grove's best, she rises from her deathbed and goes to a dance, the loose, heavy folds of her dress draping grotesquely about her wasted body.

Samuel Chapdelaine, John Elliot and Euchariste Moisan have identical attitudes toward the land. Elliot's daughter Cathleen, the only one who makes a successful marriage, chooses a university professor. Of this man Elliot speculates: "Woodrow Ormond, a sensible man, mature beyond his years! But unanchored in the soil."⁵ In *Trente Arpents*, speaking of the habitant farm establishments, Ringuet wrote: "La patrie c'est la terre, et non le sang."⁶ The land is more important than even the blood. And coping with the land isolates the Elliots, the Moisans and the Chapdelaines from even the most monumental events of the outside world. Hearing of the prospects for World War I, Moisan is completely baffled: "Those people," he says, "how can they think about fighting when the harvest isn't in yet." He begins to see how war fits into the divine order when the local priest explains to him: "La France sera punie; elle a chassé les prêtres." When John Elliot discovers that his son Arthur has joined up, his reaction is "Enlisted? What were we coming to? Meddling in the European war?" At the end of *Our Daily Bread*, Elliot staggers across miles of country, finally crawls the last few yards on his hands and knees, to die on his own piece of land. At the end of *Trente Arpents*, Moisan is still alive, working as a watchman in an American garage and dreaming of his thirty acres, but earlier in the book there is a scene similar to the climax of *Our Daily Bread*. Ephrem Moisan, the uncle from whom Euchariste inherited his farm, is found lying on one of his fields: "Il était mort sur sa terre, poitrine contre poitrine, sur sa terre qui n'avait pas consenti au divorce" — breast against breast, on his land, which had not consented to a divorce.

Moisan and Elliot are both denied the realization of their dreams. Elliot witnesses the complete disintegration of his tiny empire, Moisan is dispossessed by his son Etienne, and as old men they are both helpless and unwanted, compelled to visit children in surroundings which are alien and incomprehensible. Elliot is a sad misfit in his daughter's elegant Winnipeg home, and old Moisan wanders aimlessly around the American town where his son Ephrem has settled. Not one of their many children adopts the values of the father.

It is perhaps Grove who best sums up these values when he has John Elliot say, "I don't want my children and sons-in-law to be rich. But I want them to show me to my satisfaction that they can make their daily bread." In other words,

the purpose of life is not the pursuit of comfort or happiness according to one's lights, but to fit into the design conditioned by the land, to fit into the divine order. Happiness does not enter the picture, no more for John Elliot than for Samuel Chapdelaine or Euchariste Moisan. As Jean Simard put it in *Mon Fils pourtant heureux*; "On y est pour faire son devoir, voilà tout. La vie n'est pas un roman."⁷ When Elliot rationalizes with the words, "If God has ordained things that way, perhaps there was a meaning to it, a purpose", he professes the same almost masochistic resignation as the Chapdelaines, the same "acte de soumission à la volonté divine" as found in *Trente Arpents*.

There is no need to look further than these three novels for clarification of the first major theme, although the theme itself can be found in dozens of novels. The philosophy of life concerned is clear. It is one which could induce a strong power of endurance, a sense of absolute security. Man in harmony with the cycles of nature, with the noble calling of the land, with the divine order. Man constantly reminded of his subordinate status by the caprices of nature, yet assured by this very subordination of a complementary superior force, a Providence, a greater design of which he is a part. There is no need to search for meaning. Within the framework, the human cycle of birth, marriage, death is simple, sufficient and all-meaning.

The conclusion one must come to after considering the observations of these three writers is that rural French Canada and rural English Canada shared the same fundamental values. Despite differences of language, religions and degree of involvement with an organized church, the basic view of man and the land, as detected by three novelists who made a point of analyzing this view, was the same across Canada, and perhaps throughout the Western World for that matter. One suspects, however, that there is a peculiarly Canadian flavour in the determination to embrace a life whose requirements presuppose a sacrifice. Perhaps it has something to do with the inhospitality of the land and the severity of the climate. Perhaps it is related to the spectre of defeat inherited by French Canadians and English Canadians alike. For it is often forgotten in French Canada that the founders of so-called English Canada — the United Empire Loyalists, the Scottish Highlanders, the Irish and Ukrainians — can hardly be said to have settled here on the wave of victory.

THE SECOND MAJOR THEMATIC idea which emerges from a comparative study of the French-Canadian and English-Canadian novel —

“Breakup of the old order” — can be observed in a large number of novels, including the final sections of *Our Daily Bread* and *Trente Arpents*. In other words, many writers have attempted and are still attempting to analyze the transitional period and the process by which one set of values is replaced by another. This process coincides with large scale urbanization, man’s removal from dependence upon the cycles of nature, but it would not be correct to distinguish the contrasting values as rural and urban in application. The new values have spread into rural areas, just as the old values generally held true for people in cities. The great urban centre has simply become the spawning ground for our philosophies of life.

In the second group of novels, harmony with the divine order is replaced by the pursuit of security, which during the transition period is conceived in terms of wealth and material comfort. Sex, not yet an end in itself, remains functional, but the function is no longer reproduction. One cannot, of course, give dates to this transitional process; it is actually a state of mind. It has been going on for centuries more or less; although I suspect that it picked up momentum during and immediately after the Second World War. It is a state of mind characterized not so much by a search for new meaning or truth as by the desire to adapt new situations and experiences to the old values, with resulting confusion and often a sense of guilt.

As I have said, a number of novels explore this state of mind: Grove’s *Master of the Mill*, Robert Elie’s *Il suffit d’un jour*, Ross’s *As For Me and My House*, Richard Joly’s *Le Visage de l’attente*, Garner’s *The Silence on the Shore*, McDougall’s *Execution*, several of Callaghan’s novels, several works by Robert Choquette, Yves Thériault and Jean Simard, among others. The following five novels are especially significant: Gabrielle Roy’s *Bonheur d’occasion* — a book, incidentally, which suffered much in translation, as any Montrealer will immediately realize when startled by a famous old district being referred to in the translation as “the Saint Charles Point” — then W. O. Mitchell’s *Who Has Seen the Wind*, Hugh MacLennan’s *The Watch that Ends the Night*, Gérard Bessette’s *La Bagarre* and John Marlyn’s *Under the Ribs of Death*.

Gabrielle Roy’s *Bonheur d’occasion* mainly concerns a family living in a Montreal slum. Azarius Lacasse, the father, works on and off, and the family never has sufficient for its needs. Always behind in rent, they must shift from one broken-down flat to another every spring. Rose-Anna, the mother, follows the old farm practice of a baby every year or so, pitifully attempting to adapt her situation to the old order of values, satisfied that she has, as she puts it, “enduré son purga-

toire sur terre." Like the child Brian in Mitchell's *Who Has Seen the Wind*, she struggles to achieve a concept of God, and although she does not arrive at anything quite so anthropomorphic as "R.W. God, B.V.D.," she is equally unorthodox when she says, "Maybe he forgets sometimes. He's bothered with an awful lot of headaches." And we are told that "the old crack in her faith came from this candid supposition that God, distracted, tired, harassed like herself, had come to the point where he couldn't pay much attention to human needs."⁸ Alex Hunter in Marlyn's *Under the Ribs of Death* echoes Rose-Anna when he muses to himself: "Was there a presence interested enough? Perhaps this being, if it did exist, acted upon motives as inexplicable and capricious as his own."⁹ But the child Brian probably expresses what is in the minds of all of these characters when in reply to his grandmother's statement, "The why — that's another thing. That's for the Lord," he says, "God isn't very considerate — is He, Gramma?"¹⁰

In these novels, then, and in MacLennan's *The Watch that Ends the Night* and Bessette's *La Bagarre*, the notion of God as dispenser of the divine order is disappearing, but there is a lingering doubt, with the result that many of the characters are confused, confused about themselves, about their duty, and about society. The protagonist of *La Bagarre*, Lebeuf, who is working as a tramway sweeper to pay his way through university, does not know what to do when another of the sweepers begs him to help his daughter. The girl, Gisèle, is exceptionally pretty and intelligent, and the father is afraid that the local priest will parley her into becoming a nun. He is careful to add, "Les curées, moué, j'ai rien contre, r'marque ben."¹¹ Lebeuf finally suggests that the girl take a job and follow courses part-time at Sir George Williams University, for the idea of part-time studies has been only very recently introduced to French-Canadian institutions. But the suggestion of George Williams worries Gisèle's father. "L'instruction, j'sus pour cent pour cent," he replies. "Seulement, l'école anglaise, c'est une autre paire de manches, tsu comprends . . ."

In each of the five novels, two or more generations are presented, and there is usually a contrast of values between the generations. Gisèle, for example, has ideas of her own, which do not include fitting into any preconceived pattern of divine order. She has found out that men notice her. Florentine, Rose-Anna's daughter in *Bonheur d'occasion*, has gone ever further — she has found the possibility of exploiting sexual desire. Sally, in *The Watch that Ends the Night*, because of reasonably affluent circumstances is not quite a budding Sister Carrie like Gisèle and Florentine, but as she tells her stepfather George, she does not

intend to make the mistake his generation made. She agrees with her boyfriend Alan that they ought to go for a weekend up north. "How is he going to know if he really wants to marry me," she asks George, "unless he's found out first if I'm any good?"¹² All these girls are determined to find emotional security and material comfort whatever way they can; each one of them is a remarkable contrast to Maria Chapdelaine.

The young men in these novels are even more determined than the girls. There is Lebeuf in *La Bagarre*, but the characters of Jean Lévesque in *Bonheur d'occasion* and Alex Hunter in *Under the Ribs of Death* are clearer examples. Both are blood brothers of Joe Lampton in John Braine's *Room at the Top*, born on the wrong side of the tracks, tough, cunning, ruthless when necessary, and ready to use almost any means to get to the other side of the tracks. Jean Lévesque can force himself to abandon Florentine when it becomes apparent that she will only be in his way. Alex Hunter can abandon his family, his ethnic group, his very name and identity. But each of these young men must pay the price of recurring doubts, guilt feelings, and isolation.

Along with most of the other characters, they must suffer. They must suffer because a sense of security comes essentially from within, from the kind of conviction of a Samuel Chapdelaine or John Elliot. They replace the land by material goods, and not yet able to divorce their minds from the old system, they presuppose an order which is not there. And worse, whose non-existence is repeatedly demonstrated. Capricious as it is, the land cannot disappear as can worldly wealth during an economic depression, and spring is always sure to follow a winter. With regard to the characters in MacLennan's *The Watch that Ends the Night*, they embrace the supposed new order of socialism, panacea of the sick society, only to be largely disillusioned in the end.

In the five novels, there are many more characters than those already mentioned, a great variety in fact, for each of the authors is especially skillful at delineating character. Common to all of these books, however, is a character who acts as a background against which the anxieties of the other characters can be more readily grasped. In *Who Has Seen the Wind*, it is the Ben, and the young Ben also. In *Bonheur d'occasion*, it is Alphonse, who has been raised in a shack on the city dump. In *La Bagarre*, it is Marguerite, Lebeuf's mistress, although not enough is said about her to make her as obvious as the others. In *Under the Ribs of Death*, it is Uncle Janos, and in *The Watch that Ends the Night*, it is the major character Jerome. What all these characters have in common is that they exist in amoral worlds of their own, essentially unimpressed by the conventions of

the society around them. They can avoid the ordinary problems of living and adjusting, because they instinctively obey some internal animal force. When these people do have trouble, it is because of a conflict between themselves and the immediate society. The Ben must find a new hiding place for his still, and he joins the church so that he can become its janitor and keep his still in the church basement. Alphonse and his father must leave their shack in the dump when the shanty town is burned to the ground by city officials. Jerome, by far the most complex of the group, automatically does what George and other men cannot do: he fulfils the life of a woman with a weak heart by impregnating her and risking her death. And it works, because it is a private affair and the woman has full confidence in him. But in the army and the medical profession he continually runs into difficulties with duty and authority.

The type of conflict which people such as Jerome and the Ben experience, however, is seldom within themselves, as is the case with so many of the other characters. They may be philosophers of a sort, but they are not the creators of philosophical systems, because they function mainly from impulse. They learn by experience, as did Jerome in the war, or as the Ben when he decided to free his caged owl after spending time in jail. There is something of the wild creature in all of them, and they are associated with a wild or natural environment in some way: the lumber camp, the city dump and the prairie for Jerome, Alphonse and the Ben; the dream of Marguerite to set up a little motel in the country with Lebeuf, the stories of Uncle Janos's adventures as a sea captain. All these characters seem to exude an aura of self-reliance and independence which becomes a source of fascination for others. Divorced from external order and concepts of order, they remain basically unaffected by the breakup of the old order, and they serve to underline the instability and artificiality of a society incapable of coordinating its own realities with its assumed ethical values.

THE THIRD MAJOR THEMATIC IDEA of the French-Canadian and English-Canadian novel is "The Search for Vital Truth". This idea has revealed itself especially in novels of the last three or four years, in particular Douglas Le Pan's *The Deserter*, Hubert Aquin's *Prochain Episode*, Jacques Godbout's *Le Couteau sur la table*, and Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers*. The search for meaning, of course, can be found in a large number of books, but the kind of search I have in mind here is in a special category — it begins at the zero point.

All values have been discarded or cannot be genuinely accepted, and the protagonist attempts from his experience of life to formulate an approach to reality which can supply him with a *raison d'être*. Whereas with Brian in *Who Has Seen the Wind*, or George in *The Watch that Ends the Night*, or Alex Hunter, or Lebeuf, there is primarily a struggle of adaptation, in the works of Le Pan, Aquin, Cohen and Godbout it is a matter of creation, creation from the raw materials of personal experience.

In each of these novels the protagonist has withdrawn from his family and conventional society. Rusty in *The Deserter*, the only central character of the four books who is given a name at all, and the protagonist of *Le Couteau* both leave the army; while the central figure in *Beautiful Losers* is living in a tree-house, and the hero of *Prochain Episode* is in jail for terrorist activities. In Aquin's novel the story shifts between the prisoner's introspection and the narration of events leading up to his arrest.

All four novels dwell upon the influence of what can be called peak moments — brief periods when the character achieves a harmonic of mental, spiritual and physical satisfaction, an experience of beauty which is equated with truth. These periods seem almost independent of space and time, and the descriptions of them in each book involve a type of imagery suggestive of a return to the pristine condition. For the central characters the peak moment is also associated with sexual experience and a particular woman. Edith in *Beautiful Losers*, K in *Prochain Episode*, Althea in *The Deserter*, and Patricia in *Le Couteau* are remarkably similar. Each is physically beautiful; in fact, each of these creatures is simply the embodiment of physical female beauty, special attention being paid by all four authors to the magnificence of the thighs. It is as if these girls has been created by A. J. M. Smith's sorcerer in Lachine, for they can permit an experience removed from thought, morality, lust or inhibition of any kind. But they can not voluntarily permit a repetition of this superb experience. As Cohen writes: "it was just a shape of Edith: then it was just a humanoid shape; then it was just a shape — and for a blessed second truly I was not alone, I was part of a family. That was the first time we made love. It never happened again. Is that what you will cause me to feel, Catherine Tekakwitha? But aren't you dead? How do I get close to a dead saint? The pursuit seems like such nonsense."¹³

Catherine Tekakwitha, by the way, is the venerated Iroquois Virgin, converted by the Jesuits, who died in 1680 from self-inflicted mortification of the flesh. Cohen's *Beautiful Losers*, its meaning perhaps somewhat obscured by an overload of sordid detail, which has caused the book to be gravely misjudged by a number

of reviewers, uses this extreme religious fanatic as a symbol of absolute conviction. The conviction is morbid and perverted, but it still represents a vivid antithesis to current nothingness, a condition of mind otherwise only relieved by the peak moment and the kind of conviction associated with Quebec Separatism, the positive psychological value of which is underlined by Cohen, Godbout and Aquin. Cohen goes further than Le Pan, Aquin, perhaps even Godbout, in creating an impression of the spiritual bankruptcy of the age. His pseudo-character F. is symbolic of the physical, sensual aspects of man, and the surface homosexual relationship between the protagonist and F. represents modern man's frantic search for sensual experience, his worship of the body beautiful, the sex kitten, the pop society's conscious or unconscious fascination with the forbidden, the novel, or the perverted. F.'s legacy of soap, cosmetics and firecrackers is symbolic of various sensations, those connected with the World War and family life being appropriately denied the protagonist.

Godbout also creates a strong atmosphere of spiritual bankruptcy, but dwells more upon social, political aspects than upon sex and sensation. His method, however, is very similar to Cohen's. Both authors employ what Cohen describes as "the newsreel escaped into the Feature," a mixture of fact and fiction, abandoning traditional narrative and plot for a numbered series of small sections, each concerned with an aspect of the protagonist's consciousness. Godbout incorporates liberal amounts of English into his text, and Cohen does the same with French. Heroines in both books are crushed to death, and at the end both protagonists enter a self-effacing identification fantasy. Cohen's device of the protagonist's impossible desire for union with the Iroquois Virgin, Catherine Tekakwitha, provides a fascinating dramatization of the search theme.

There is little satire in any of the four novels, for each of the central characters is more concerned with the annihilation of his own identity and the search for a vital truth to justify his existence than with what may be wrong or false in the society around him. The emptiness of the society is communicated, but not satirized. Rusty discovers the underworld of misfits and criminals created in the aftermath of the Second World War. Many of the people he meets are like the Ben, as is the Mexican Pedro in *Le Couteau*; they are able to function on the impulse level and thereby achieve an enviable primitive happiness. "Only be careful not to think, or look closely, or ask questions, or play the intellectual," the narrator in *Le Couteau* says of Pedro.¹⁴ In *Beautiful Losers*, F. writes to the protagonist: "You plagued me like the moon. I knew you were bound by old laws of suffering and obscurity." And Le Pan writes of Rusty: "After his vigil with Steve it cheered

him to think of them feasting and moving on, knowing the world was desperate but not caring, baiting it, challenging it with its own heat, guardians and wastrels of its most essential carnal warmth. They would create festivals in the cold, he was sure, wherever they were. He was glad they existed, although he was shut out of their perfection too."¹⁵ A subtle change in attitude has thus taken place since the novels treating the second major theme: people like the Ben are no longer the oddballs and outcasts, but are now the possessors of a kind of perfection. And the problem for Rusty and for the three other main characters is that they cannot submerge their intellects. They are the victims of their own honesty, intelligence and awareness, stranded without an engaging point of reference. Nor can they be sustained by a projection or continuum of peak moments; they cannot cross the river of meaning by hopping from the stone of one sensual experience to another.

Douglas Le Pan differs from the other three authors in that he concludes *The Deserter* on a mildly positive note. Rusty eventually accepts that life is a shared experience, demanding sacrifice and only occasionally providing a glimpse of self-fulfillment, a complexity of animal, emotional and intellectual aspects, devoid of any superimposed order, yet still permitting the individual through involvement to breed a personal order and meaning around himself. He is a long way from the rationale of Samuel Chapdelaine and John Elliot, for in determining the significance of a human life the emphasis is now on the man rather than an inherited divine order, but there are the common elements of shared experience and sacrifice, and Rusty is finally able to face the world. The protagonist of *Beautiful Losers* comes to a realization of his state, but without Rusty's impetus to commit himself: "O Father, Nameless and Free of Description," he says, "lead me from the Desert of the Possible. Too long I have dealt with Events. Too long I labored to become an Angel. I chased Miracles with a bag of Power to salt their wild Tails. I tried to dominate Insanity so I could steal its Information. I tried to program the Computers with Insanity. I tried to create Grace to prove that Grace existed. . . . We could not see the Evidence so we stretched our Memories. . . . we did not train ourselves to Receive because we believed there wasn't Anything to Receive and we could not endure with this Belief." *Le Couteau and Prochain Episode*, on the other hand, both end with a deep sense of frustration and it would appear that each of the four authors in his own way is close to social and psychological reality.

One thing, however, is clear: considering the particular social climate in which Godbout and Aquin wrote their books and deferring for a moment the universal

thematic implications, these two authors are undoubtedly close to Quebec reality. In both books the internal frustration of the protagonists is overtly correlated with recent events in French-Canadian society. Godbout actually incorporates into his text, along with statistics on the American nuclear arsenal and various other tragic world developments, a newspaper report of the F.L.Q. bombing which killed an elderly watchman, William O'Neil. Aquin's *Prochain Episode* has an obvious allegorical level of interpretation: the protagonist is French-Canadian youth seeking self-fulfillment, which is equated with independence for French Canada. H. de Heutz, in his various guises, is the power structure associated with English Canada and the federal government. The girl K, object of the protagonist's adoration, is *la patrie*, Québec. The love affair, then, becomes a highly emotional patriotism, and there is the strong implication at the end of the book that K, Québec, has betrayed this patriotic sentiment. The reader is made aware of the possibility that H. de Heutz has some kind of deal with K, for the protagonist overhears a telephone conversation between him and a girl staying at l'hôtel d'Angleterre. When the protagonist goes to this hotel for his prearranged rendezvous with K, she has already left.

To pursue this train of thought a little further, it seems to me that the level of interpretation of *Le Couteau* and *Prochain Episode* which has to do with the current situation in Quebec is highly revealing, perhaps more revealing than a Royal Commission report could ever be, because a creative writer is free to use artistic intuition and imagination as well as analysis. Both Godbout and Aquin, and Leonard Cohen to a certain extent also, imply that the present unrest in French Canada has really nothing to do with the question of what French Canadians want. A list of wants can be formulated easily enough, no doubt, but to supply these wants will not solve the problem, which is primarily a community projection of the sense of frustration so effectively dramatized in the work of Godbout and Aquin. Moreover, this sense of frustration is hardly peculiar to Quebec, as a number of contemporary novels from several countries reveal, as Godbout himself illustrates with his varied references to the world scene, and as Aquin suggests by his hero's identification with different types of exiles. It has reached, it would seem, a heightened degree in French Canada, but I suspect this is so mainly because in Quebec, conveniently, there are all the ingredients for the illusion of a specific cause and a specific solution. What is not illusionary, however, is that French Canadians sense and fear that they are being steadily overwhelmed by what they call the Anglo-Saxon mentality or way of life, which is precisely the same thing many English Canadians also fear but refer to as

Americanization, which in turn is known to many Americans as the furious dehumanization of the age. In Cohen's *Beautiful Losers*, the idea is arrestingly illustrated in a passage where a Danish Vibrating machine comes alive on its own, like a Frankenstein's monster, and succeeds in bringing sexual satisfaction to Edith. Aldous Huxley, an international figure, projected the idea to an ultimate end and called it the *Brave New World*.

But to get back to the common themes of French-Canadian and English-Canadian Literature, it is clear that Douglas Le Pan, Hubert Aquin, Leonard Cohen and Jacques Godbout are all concerned with the same basic problem. Their approaches to the problem, of course, differ. In fact, it is hard to imagine four worlds so completely different as those of the four books in question — Godbout's prairie motels and mobile set, Aquin's Alpine roads and James Bond intrigue, Cohen's Indian legends and sensual fantasies, Le Pan's London dockyards and leftovers of a war. Yet despite these differences, all four novels explore the same emptiness, the same inspiration, the same frustration, and the same major thematic idea of man's quest for vital truth.

IT CAN BE SAFELY SAID, therefore, that French-Canadian and English-Canadian novels of the Twentieth Century have traced a single basic line of ideological development, creating a whole spectrum of common images, attitudes and ideas. They have done so for the most part independently, each in its own solitude, but obviously we have twin solitudes. In effect, recalling Marius Bewley's statement that writers define nationality, it becomes evident that French Canadians and English Canadians are much more alike than many spokesmen have ever dared to suspect. Aside from language, it is quite probable that there are at the moment no fundamental cultural differences between the two major ethnic groups of Canada. Cohen's *Beautiful Losers* could almost be a sequel to Godbout's *Le Couteau sur la table*. We have evolved according to the same prescription. We have outgrown what differences we may once have had, the Rev. Ellis of Hamilton and Canon Groulx notwithstanding.

It should be pointed out, however, that there are certainly well established myths to endorse the supposition of two distinctly different cultures, and that these myths have been perpetuated by writers in both languages. Not counting Hugh MacLennan and Canon Lionel Groulx, there are no twentieth-century French-Canadian or English-Canadian writers I know of who have ventured to

offer more than a gesture of insight into the other ethnic group. French-Canadian characters can indeed be found in English-Canadian novels — there are Blacky Valois in Allister's *A Handful of Rice*, Gagnon in Callaghan's *The Loved and the Lost* and one of the prostitutes in his *Such is My Beloved*, René de Sevigny in Graham's *Earth and High Heaven*, Frenchy Turgeon in Garner's *Storm Below* and a whole family in his *Silence on the Shore*, and a multitude of others; but these characters are either stereotyped or completely out of context. The same situation obtains with the French-Canadian novel. Even Patricia in *Le Couteau* is the familiar stereotype of the wealthy English person from the west side of the Montreal mountain, with a hint of the Hemingway "rich bitch" for colour. Patricia is not in fact of English origin at all, being half Jewish and half Irish according to the author; but then even for French-Canadian intellectuals the word *anglais* has always been a very catholic term.

I mentioned Hugh MacLennan and Canon Groulx as exceptions. Groulx, however, is not really an exception to the general rule of mutual ignorance. His *L'Appel de la race*, a novel written in 1922, does indeed consider English Canada, but upon a basis of racist theories which would hardly be taken seriously except in places like South Africa and Alabama. Hugh MacLennan's *Two Solitudes*, on the other hand, is a unique and impressive accomplishment. It has become, almost overnight seemingly, a historical novel. The author set out to dramatize certain basic concepts which had conditioned French-Canadian society, and he succeeded in doing so. Some readers in French Canada have been dismayed by the ending of the book and its implication that Paul will be assimilated into the English group. But what in fact happens is that part way through the book MacLennan shifts from dramatization of group concepts to characterization of individuals, so that the dénouement should not be regarded as a prophecy about the future of French Canada. One English-speaking novelist, incidentally, did in fact predict that French Canadians would be assimilated, and with great rapidity. That novelist was Frances Brooke, and her prophecy was made in the year 1769.

With Hugh MacLennan's *Two Solitudes* as a partial exception, the two literary traditions of Canada have remained essentially isolated. In a recent issue of *Liberté*, Naïm Kattan suggested that so far as the English-language tradition is concerned, the individual writers are even isolated from one another.¹⁶ But I don't think that Mr. Kattan is entirely correct. Even though geographically separated, the major writers of English Canada are undoubtedly aware of each other's work, possibly as much so as French-Canadian writers living in the same apartment block in Montreal. Mr. Kattan's real point, however, was that com-

pared to English-Canadian novelists, the novelists of French Canada are a far more homogeneous group, which is true. They are also, I might add, so productive that if an outside observer were asked to indicate which of the two language groups in Canada is in greater danger of disappearing culturally, he would very probably pick the English-Canadian.

At the moment, for instance, an intriguing linguistic experiment is taking place. Jacques Renaud in *Le Cassé*, Claude Jasmin, Gérald Godin, and Laurent Girouard in parts of *La Ville inhumaine* have elected to use *joual*, the Quebec dialect, as a literary language. They have done so, presumably, as a symbolic protest. The critics for the most part are either uncertain about the significance of this experiment, or they condemn it outright as a kind of submission to corruption. *Joual* certainly is a conglomeration of corruptions, contractions, archaisms, mispronunciations, loan words and innovations — which, of course, is precisely what French was before the Isle de France standard and the formidable Académie française, or what English was and regional spoken English still is. Any notion of legitimacy in language must perforce be a figment of the purist's imagination. But be that as it may, the recent experiments with *joual* could have far-reaching effect. One has only to recall the influence of Mark Twain on American Literature, or the cultural explosion in Norway with the creation of a distinctive Norwegian language based upon rural dialects. Some French-Canadian critics may well be lamenting the very initiative which might lead to a distinguishing idiom.

To return once more to the comparative novel, one last question remains to be considered, the question of national identity with which we began. It has been shown that in the course of twentieth-century evolution, principal novels in French and English Canada have embraced the same spectrum of attitudes and ideas, albeit separately. What has this phenomenon to do with the definition of national identity? Has our literature produced one, or two, or no definitions?

In the first place, if the notable parallels in French-Canadian and English-Canadian Literature have any significance at all, then it must be because there does exist a single, common national mystique, a common set of conditioning forces, the mysterious apparatus of a single sense of identity. But, nevertheless, I think that our literature has not yet succeeded in providing more than an embryonic definition of nationality. The reasons for this lack of success up to now are probably myriad. We have moved through stages of masochistic resignation and dependence, as illustrated in the works of Hémon, Grove and Ringuet, of confusion and struggle of adaptation, as seen in novels by Roy, MacLennan, Mitchell, Bessette and Marlyn, and we are at the moment groping simultaneously with the

very essence of truth. We have not had an intellectual climate of positive myth and idealism to work within, as the Americans have had for instance. We have always known that this country is not the "garden of the world," and any notions of "manifest destiny" the French-Canadian explorers possessed, long ago went down the drain. There has been too much of the Catherine Tekakwitha in us for our own good. We, French Canadians and English Canadians, have perversely insisted upon isolation and upon stereotyped images of each other, and like the characters in *Le Pan*, Cohen, Aquin and Godbout, or even in MacLennan's *Barometer Rising*, we know what we are not, but we are either unwilling or still incapable of articulating what we are. Yet, as this paper has attempted to demonstrate, a process of involuntary consolidation of literary efforts has begun to take effect, and an emerging national mystique is somehow dictating the themes of Canadian creative writing.

This process could be strengthened by a greater mutual knowledge on the part of both groups of Canadians and an increase in comparative studies. More and better translations would be useful. But even of greater benefit for French-Canadian novels, so many of which contain excellent colloquial dialogue, would be a series of annotated editions, providing in appendices translations of difficult expressions, somewhat as the standard editions of Chaucer do. In any event, I think that we are now at a stage of genuine mutual interest, which is likely to be sustained. It seems also likely that as mutual knowledge of French-Canadian and English-Canadian Literature increases, as we become more aware of the significant parallels between the two, both bodies of literature will increase in scope and power, and we shall at the same time move toward a positive sense and adequate definition of Canadian identity.

Notes

- ¹ Introduction to James Fenimore Cooper, *Major Writers of America*, ed. Perry Miller et al. (New York, 1962), p. 280.
- ² Louis Hémon, *Maria Chapdelaine* (Paris-Coulommiers: Le Livre de poche, 1954), p. 193: Tu mourras quand le bon Dieu voudra que tu meures, et à mon idée ça n'est pas encore de ce temps icitte. Qu'est-ce qu'il ferait de toi? Le Paradis est plein de vieilles femmes, au lieu qu'icitte nous n'en avons qu'une et elle peut encore rendre des services, des fois . . .
- ³ Louis Hémon, p. 146: Jésus-Christ, qui tendais les bras aux malheureux, pourquoi ne l'as-tu pas relevé de la neige avec tes mains pâles? Pourquoi, Sainte Vierge, ne l'avez-vous pas soutenu d'un geste miraculeux quand il a trébuché pour la dernière

fois? Dans toutes les légions du ciel, pourquoi ne s'est-il pas trouvé un ange pour lui montrer le chemin?

- ⁴ Louis Hémon, p. 218: Oh! la certitude! le contentement d'une promesse auguste qui dissipe le brouillard redoutable de la mort! Pendant que le prêtre accomplissait les gestes consacrés et que son murmure se mêlait aux soupirs de la mourante, Samuel Chapdelaine et ses enfants priaient sans relever la tête, presque consolés, exempts de doute et d'inquiétude, sûrs que ce qui se passait là était un pacte conclu avec la divinité, qui faisait du Paradis bleu semé d'étoiles d'or un bien légitime.
- ⁵ Frederick Philip Grove, *Our Daily Bread* (Toronto, 1928), p. 77.
- ⁶ Ringuet, *Trente Arpents* (Montréal: Fides, 1964), p. 59.
- ⁷ Jean Simard, *Mon Fils pourtant heureux* (Montréal: Le Cercle du livre de France, 1956), p. 60.
- ⁸ Gabrielle Roy, *Bonheur d'occasion* (Montréal: Editions Beauchemin, 1965), p. 89: "Peut-être qu'il oublie des fois. Il y a tant de misère qui s'adresse à lui." Ainsi, la seule fêlure dans sa foi venait de cette candide supposition que Dieu, distrait, fatigué, harassé comme elle, en arrivait à ne plus accorder qu'une attention éparse aux besoins humains.
- ⁹ John Marlyn, *Under the Ribs of Death*, New Canadian Library Series (Toronto, 1964), p. 211.
- ¹⁰ W. O. Mitchell, *Who Has Seen the Wind*, Macmillan Paperback Series (Toronto, 1947), p. 170.
- ¹¹ Gérard Bessette, *La Bagarre* (Montréal: Le Cercle du livre de France, 1958), p. 51.
- ¹² Hugh MacLennan, *The Watch that Ends the Night* (Toronto, 1960), p. 64.
- ¹³ Leonard Cohen, *Beautiful Losers* (Toronto, 1966), p. 96.
- ¹⁴ Jacques Godbout, *Le Couteau sur la table* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1965), p. 98: Seulement faut pas s'aviser de réfléchir, de regarder, de soupçonner, de jouer à l'intellectuel . . .
- ¹⁵ Douglas Le Pan, *The Deserter* (Toronto, 1964), p. 226.
- ¹⁶ Naïm Kattan, "Romanciers canadiens-anglais et canadiens-français," *Liberté*, No. 42 (Nov.-Dec. 1966), p. 479.