

THE IMAGINARY UNIVERSE OF JACQUES BENOIT

by

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis is a study of three of the literary works of Jacques Benoit: Jos Carbone, Les Princes and Gisèle et le serpent. It will be an attempt to combine different spatial elements of the texts, literal and symbolic, in order to define and explore the imaginary universe of our author.

In our first text, Jos Carbone, we look to establish the role of the unconscious. The background predominance of night and dark elements, unseen invaders, habitations, in short, the forest in general appears as a metaphor for the unconscious mind of the hero Jos Carbone. In our analysis, we attempt to explore this imaginary universe with intent to establish the theme of the territorial quest as it might apply to the central couple Jos and Myrtie.

In our analysis of Benoit's novel, Les Princes, we endeavour to explore the allegorical world with an emphasis on the nonverbal communication of both the topography and the inhabitants of *la Ville*. We observe the confrontation of men and dogs in an effort to examine the role of what is considered civil or animal, pet or prey. The impotency and frustration of Coquin society coupled with corrupt Grâligeau authority evoke the ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau on social inequality. We shall, therefore, attempt to apply some of his beliefs to imaginary elements of the novel. Finally, we shall examine the unvoiced refutation of the Grâligeau's verbal law and the possible future outcome of *la Ville*'s violent upheaval.

Gisèle et le serpent will be studied in terms of a creative quest to write on the part of the hero and narrator, Grégoire Rabouin. We will take into account the displacement, transformation and constant motion of the text as well as the combination of fantastic and conventional elements. The role of the protagonist Gisèle is to be examined in terms of her capacity as role model, motivation to write and magical force behind the liberation of the hero's creative drive. We shall show the conflict created by the doctor's frustration with his rational profession and examine the unblocking of his creativity as portrayed by his relinquishing of control. Furthermore, an analysis of the parodies of his occupation, the deformation of language and patients as well as the fairy-tale format of the novel will confirm his desire to renounce medicine in favour of literary creation. Finally, we see the completion of Rabouin's narrative voyage in the discovery of his ability to write.

In conclusion we shall state general observations about the imaginary universe as it applies to the comparison of our three texts. Specifically, this will entail the unconscious world, the violent and disruptive element and Benoit's tendency to stray from the rules of standard literary genres.

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to my Mother and Father.

## INTRODUCTION

We shall begin our study of Jacques Benoit with a short summary of the author's work. To follow will be a resume of the principal critical work done on Benoit so far. Finally, we will state in general the way in which we plan to continue the study of Benoit's literature and the methods we intend to use in our analysis.

Benoit's first work, Jos Carbone, revolves around the character who gives his name to the book. A tiny, unalterable man, Jos maintains a hermit like hunting and gathering lifestyle which he shares with the beautiful and blond Myrtie. In a cabin built by Jos' own hand, they inhabit a nameless forest during an unspecified epoch.

At Jos' invitation, a second couple have occupied an underground dwelling, a *souterrain*, not far from Jos' house. Tall and ageless, Pique and his semi-savage cohabitant, Germaine, bring the forest population to four. However, when Pierrot, an uninvited fifth resident appears, the security of the forest becomes threatened and Jos enlists Pique's aid to expel or kill the intruder.

Les Voleurs, Benoit's second novel, is an attempt at literary realism and, therefore, marks quite a departure for our author. It is a story of survival in the poorer quarters of Montreal's east side, of police brutality and of church



corruption. The narrator is Emile, an adolescent small town boy who, after the death of his father, is sent to live in the big city with his uncle Jovu and aunt Jeannine. In their dark, cramped Montreal apartment, the young teenager experiences the reality of urban poverty, alcoholism, unemployment and domestic violence.

Benoit's third work, Patience et Firlipon, represents a return to the fantastic genre for which he is better known. It is a love story heavily steeped in violence and sexuality. The setting is a futuristic Montreal and, as the title suggests, the story is centered on the romantic encounters of Patience Blondin and Firlipon Roger, two of the ten varied and colourful characters who reside in Mme Flora Tremblée's pension.

Les Princes, Benoit's fourth book, is set in the fictional town of *la Ville*, populated by three distinct societies: human, monster and canine. Human society is subdivided into classes with the wealthy minority Grâligeannois holding absolute power and the impoverished inhabitants of le Coquin grim pant, les hommes Bleus or Coquins, constituting a subhuman race who depend on the Blue river for nourishment. Monsters form a diverse and mysterious community on the outskirts of *la Ville* and Canine society is founded on a complex social hierarchy organized not by class but by ability.

Given the sterility of the earth and the inequality in the human class system, *la Ville* is on the verge of a violent rebellion. The struggle begins when a Coquin named Ronule kills and eats a dog, thus violating the centuries old *loi canine*. When hostilities escalate between Coquins and dogs, the army is forced

to occupy the Coquin grimpant and establish a strained truce. However, Kroknell, *la Ville*'s military commander, profits from a persistent distrust of dogs to orchestrate, through the use of planted agitators, a violent anti-dog riot which spreads to all quarters except Grâligeau and results in the near extinction of canine society.

Finally, Jacques Benoit's fifth and latest work, Gisèle et le serpent, is once again set in Montreal. Written in a first person diary form, it is the story of a Montreal doctor, Grégoire Rabouin, and his adventures with an attractive young temptress, Gisèle Ribeault. On two occasions, Rabouin yields the narrator role to the character of Gisèle who writes of a liberation from a dominant husband through the advent of a talking snake called Tournoukriel or Toutou for short. The serpent restores her physical beauty and, in exchange for becoming his *gîte*, offers her special powers.

When the doctor resumes his narrative, however, Toutou becomes la Farine, an active character in human form with a ghostly white complexion. Rabouin meets Gisèle and la Farine on mount Royal and embarks on a nightmare journey which concludes in the bourgeois marriage of Grégoire and Gisèle.

Also of note are two films for which Jacques Benoit has written the screenplay: La Maudite Galette and Réjeanne Padovani. In the first of these two, released in 1972, greed and violence dominate as we enter Montreal's underworld. The plot revolves around the jealous pursuit of stolen money, the *maudite galette*. Berthe and Ernest, the two main characters, battle over the money, the former out of greed, the latter in order to give it to

his parents. The film ends with the violent death of Berthe and Ernest followed shortly after by the departure of his parents to Florida with the *galette*.

Réjeanne Padovani, released a year later in 1973, also contains elements of Montreal's organized crime as well as political corruption. At a reception, entrepreneur Vincent Padovani entertains well known political figures to celebrate the opening of a new highway. Vincent's wife, Réjeanne Padovani, returns after running off on him and this event, coupled with a popular revolt disrupts the celebration.

Not much has been written on the works of Benoit and what little there is consists mostly of *comptes rendus* and short magazine articles. However, we have chosen five critics whose analysis of Jacques Benoit's work deserves mention in that it seems to characterize the type of study to which our author's novels have so far been subject.

In an analysis of Benoit's first novel, Jos Carbone, Gabrielle Poulin does well to point out the lack of time or space references in the story, an aspect which enhances the novels universality.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, she perceives the unconscious aspects of the novel, indicating the play between real and imagined characters and their almost fairy-tale appearance of the forest and its characters. However, it is the dominance of fire imagery which attracts this critic more than any other allusion in the novel and her analysis supports this.

"Le roman de Jacques Benoit présente aussi l'aspect d'un creuset où, sous l'action du feu, les êtres se purifient et se soudent mystérieusement les uns aux autres."<sup>2</sup> So writes Poulin

who sees the Carbone name, candles, matches, hearth, even colour and illumination as playing a part in creating the fire imagery around which the novel's characters interact. Although her critique is brief and not intended to delve deep into a psychological examination of this work, Poulin's insight into the unconscious in Jos Carbone will be the starting point upon which we intend to build a more detailed study of Benoit's first novel.

Leonard W. Sugden touches lightly on the first four novels by our author, concentrating primarily on Jacques Benoit's second novel, Les Voleurs and, to some extent, the imaginary universe described in Les Princes.<sup>3</sup> However, it is an article which accents the realist side of Benoit's writing being that Sugden hails Les Voleurs, Benoit's only attempt at literary realism, as a work in which the "...writer's talents have found their finest expression...".<sup>4</sup> The critic, therefore, places great emphasis on Benoit's portrayal of a Montreal neighbourhood, the violence and sex which dominate and the mixed genres of Jacques Benoit's literary style.

Most importantly, Sugden mentions the duality of the characters in Les Voleurs who seem to be both villain and hero. This duality produces an inversion in stereotypes where, for example, the Bishop is seen as a base character and Foviolain, a former convict, is elevated to hero status. This observation is certainly applicable in Les Princes where the social hierarchy is reversed and the canine society appears more noble than that of the rich Grâligeannois.

François Ricard has written an interesting comparison article on Benoit's fourth novel, Les Princes, and André Major's

L'Epouvantail.<sup>5</sup> Pointing out briefly the utopian style and fantasy milieu in which the novel begins, Ricard soon makes the very important observation that "...l'invraisemblance, au bout de quelques pages, devient de moins en moins évidente, de moins en moins sensible, au point que le lecteur a tôt fait de l'oublier presque complètement et de se laisser convaincre par cette histoire farfelue comme par le plus réaliste des récits".<sup>6</sup> In essence, the critic indicates that, although the decor may be imaginary, the action follows the rigid rules of the real world and, therefore, is an allegory applicable to the human situation.

Concerning the fantastic in Benoit's writing, Estelle Dansereau has written a comparative article on Roch Carrier and two of our author's more fantastical novels: Patience et Firlipon and Les Princes.<sup>7</sup> Like Poulin, she alludes to the fairy-tale structure in Benoit's work, specifically in his third published novel, Patience et Firlipon. However, she does point out that the author respects "...la forme du conte de fées tout en violant le contenu traditionnel".<sup>8</sup>

As for Les Princes, Dansereau also mentions the initial utopian style and, like Ricard which she quotes, stresses the way in which the fantastic in Benoit's work is soon replaced by reality. She states that our author's writing is such that the bizarre is treated as natural and, therefore, the reader soon accepts the events as real. Again, the effect is one of a moral lesson in allegory form.

Finally, an article by Jacques Allard on Gisèle et le serpent deserves mention.<sup>9</sup> In his analysis, the critic divides Benoit's novel into four parts: *énigme* (is this Gisèle a woman or

a witch?), confirmation of the *hypothèse diabolique* (nightmare), *couple Gisèle-Grégoire* and, finally, *épilogue* (the explication for writing the book).

However, it is Allard's observation of the inversion and ambiguity inherent at all levels of the text which we find important. The obvious ambiguity of the unidentified "Je" on the back cover of the text, for example. Does it refer to Benoit or Rabouin? As Allard states, there is a complete reversal of the hero's life where his world becomes *le monde à l'envers*, so to speak, and Tournoukriel, is the master of this inversion.

We propose in our analysis to explore the *espace imaginaire* of three of Benoit's novels: Jos Carbone, Les Princes and Gisèle et le serpent. This concept, however, does not just concern elements of spatial order. On the contrary, it is the overall text of each novel which we will consider to be the description of a psychological state portrayed as a symbolic link. Actions, characters and their behaviour, even narrative structures all contribute to forming this *espace imaginaire* which puts into play the dramatic transformation of a state of focused consciousness in the representative person of the hero. The principal characteristic of this space lies in its disruptive, violent and even apocalyptic aspects.

We can define some of the borders of the *espace imaginaire* in Jacques Benoit's work by using common elements which reoccur in the three chosen texts. For example, we remark the nocturnal universe or dark/night imagery which is illustrated by the misty forest and the unconscious mind in Jos Carbone. Moreover, this same imagery is depicted by the shadowy world of *la Ville* in Les

Princes or in the nightmare journey of Grégoire Rabouin in Gisèle et le serpent. Also important in our definition is water symbolism. Here we point to the aquatic world of Pierrot, the role of the ruisseau Bleu, and the rebirth connotations of water in Gisèle et le serpent. We note that some aspects which shape this concept of fictional space are more evident in certain texts than in others. We state as examples the passion and territoriality in Jos Carbone, the social conflict and intolerance in Les Princes or the transformation and liberation in Gisèle et le serpent. All of these elements may exist in the other novels to be studied but certainly not to the same degree.

As certain critics have wisely noted, there are two opposing tendencies in the work of our author: a quasi-sociological realism mingled with a distinctly fantastic world. It is precisely this original mixture which characterizes Benoit's style. The choice of the three novels as the object of our study, therefore, reflects our intention to concentrate on the fantastic which, in our opinion, constitutes the most dynamic quality of our author's writing.

Jos Carbone is chosen first of all as it represents a territorial quest. We will analyze this text in terms of Jos' unconscious mind, his attempts to possess and to protect as well as his relationship with the other central character, Myrtie. Our second novel, Les Princes, is a study in nonverbal communication. We select this work among others as we intend to explore the way in which the topography, terrain and the inhabitants of *la Ville* interact and articulate in an unspoken manner within the confines of this fictional universe. Finally, we will follow the

progression of Grégoire Rabouin's voyage of self-discovery through to the realization of his dream to write.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Gabrielle Poulin, "Littérature. Jos Carbone ou la puissance du feu," Relations, No.340, juil.-août 1969, pp.208-09.

<sup>2</sup> Poulin, p.208.

<sup>3</sup> Leonard W. Sugden, "Man as Monster. Dog and Prince: A Critique of *Les Voleurs* by Jacques Benoit," Mosaic, XI, 3 Spring (1978), pp.153-63.

<sup>4</sup> Sugden, p.153.

<sup>5</sup> François Ricard, "Deux romanciers de trente ans," Liberté, 16, no.2 (1974), pp.94-9.

<sup>6</sup> Ricard, p.96.

<sup>7</sup> Estelle Dansereau, "Le Fantastique chez Roch Carrier et Jacques Benoit," Littérature Canadienne, No.88, Spring (1981), pp.39-44.

<sup>8</sup> Dansereau, p.43.

<sup>9</sup> Jacques Allard, "Jacques Benoit; Gisèle et le serpent," Livres et auteurs québécois, (1981), pp.31-35.

## CHAPTER I

The Unconscious World of Jos Carbone

To explore the *espace imaginaire* in Jos Carbone we begin with an examination of the role of the unconscious.<sup>1</sup> We shall consider it to be the primary focus of the novel. Next we shall turn our attention to more precise elements of this ongoing theme. For example, the forest is often portrayed as a living entity, a character in the story so to speak. What are the traits of this forest character and how do Jos and Pique relate to it? Also important are the domains that each male character chooses to inhabit. What can the home tell us about the inhabitant? Finally, an analysis of domain incorporates the idea of territoriality. We shall endeavour to explore this idea with an emphasis on the relationship of Jos and Myrtie.

The unconscious manifests itself in many ways. Firstly, we note a general background predominance of night and dark elements in the text.<sup>2</sup> Secondly, we explore the concrete manifestations of the unconscious: Who or what is Pierrot exactly? As Gabrielle Poulin suggests, could he be "...un fantasme né de l'imagination inquiète de Jos Carbone"?<sup>3</sup> Next, how does Pique's souterrain relate to a discussion of the unconscious? Finally we analyze the less tangible elements of the unconscious: fear, paranoia and the insecurity and vulnerability that love brings.

During the first night Jos, returning home to his beloved Myrtie, embarks upon a nocturnal stream of philosophizing. As he brings to mind all the doubts and fears concerning his relationship with Myrtie, the cold and dark forest surrounding him forms a backdrop which compliments his state of mind (Quel besoin avait-il de cette femme?...rugit son cerveau...Pourquoi ces dérangements nocturnes...quand on est seul au coeur de la nuit, qu'il fait froid, humide...).<sup>4</sup>

Once Myrtie has realized Jos' worst fears and revealed to him the presence of a mysterious invader, his second night is spent keeping vigil over her. Jos is more or less guarding her from an unseen and unknown threat to which nightfall and the sound of the wind whistling through the chimney give body. On the third night, Jos leads Myrtie outside at midnight to introduce her to Pique and Germaine in the souterrain. Venturing into the night, "Il fait noir comme chez le loup."<sup>5</sup> and Jos, sensing the threatening presence of an invisible lynx, attacks wildly in the darkness. During this nocturnal scene the symbolism is perhaps more evident. Jos seeks to confront his fear by seeking it out and conquering it. The source of his fears however, remains as ephemeral and elusive as the lynx.

It is interesting to note that Jos and Pique's daytime search for the invader proves futile. Jos must make other plans to trap the invader. So on the fourth night, in his carefully concealed storage hut, Jos devises a strategy to lure the stranger out of the darkness. This plan must naturally include Myrtie as it is she who brings out the insecurity and fear which is at the root of Jos' troubles. Yet another daytime failure to

capture the elusive invader brings us to the closing two nights during which dark emotions dominate. Germaine and Pique both pay nocturnal visits to Pierrot's raft home; the former is drawn by her sexuality, the latter is driven by fear and guilt. The following night encompasses the violent murders of both Pierrot and Pique which transpire in the relative darkness of Pique's underground dwelling. As we shall soon see the souterrain and the darkness of night are related in that they evoke the inner unconscious world of the characters.

Who is this invader and where does he come from? Pierrot seems to be somewhat of a mysterious character whose presence is symbolized in many unseen elements of the novel. For instance, before Myrtie has even revealed Pierrot's presence to Jos, she asks her man if he has "...entendu le loup tout à l'heure?".<sup>6</sup> The wolf represents the same concealed threat as the lynx whose importance is such that its image dominates the front and back cover of the book.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, Pierrot himself is described as a mysterious pale white face at the window; a phantom dressed in white who trespasses in the forest. Coupled with the sound of scratching at her door, the invader's description conjures up once again the idea of the invisible lynx. The question naturally arises: Is Pierrot's invading character real or imaginary? Even Jos wonders if he is dreaming or if he has "...réellement vu une tête blanche à travers le carreau?".<sup>8</sup> Jos' doubt concerning Pierrot's existence establishes the latter as a character who personifies invisible repressed fears.

The natural elements of the forest tend to describe Pierrot as well. As Jos keeps watch over Myrtie, a cold night wind

invades their home through the chimney. This invisible night intruder parallels Pierrot right down to its fashion of entering the Carbone's home via the hearth. Furthermore, the wind whistles like a maniac, an image which recalls the unpredictable Pierrot once again:

Vers deux heures du matin, le vent enfla et se mit à siffler comme un maniaque dans la cheminée. Les cendres s'élevaient, couraient sur le plancher, les poils de la peau de mouton se hérissaient comme pris de vertige.<sup>9</sup>

The wind is worse than ever the next morning and is joined by rain. As Pierrot is often associated with water in that he makes his home on a raft in the middle of a pond, the narrator's portrait of a pale day and rain falling on the roof evokes the idea of the white faced Pierrot on the roof of Jos' cabin: "Au matin, le vent hurlait de plus belle, la pluie crépitait sur le toit. Le jour était bleu, blafard."<sup>10</sup>

If we assemble and compare these elements of wind, whistling and the sound of rain, we note that their nature is immaterial. All three seem to indicate an audible but not a visible nature. They are perceived but not defined. Their presence is sensed but never declared. Given the association of these elements with Pierrot's mysterious side, we can see how they belong to the continuing metaphor of unconscious elements in the text.

Finally Pierrot is connected with the north. He makes his home in the north and seeks refuge further north when he feels threatened. Such is the case when he throws Germaine overboard. Historically the north signified freedom, here it represents a menace of invasion. As well, one identifies the north with that which is untamed, savage and primitive. In terms of appearance and behaviour this certainly describes Pierrot as his character

inspires and embodies the primitive emotions (lust, violence, jealousy, fear, etc.) associated with the unconscious.<sup>11</sup>

We have seen how a character such as Pierrot can portray invisible elements of the unconscious. Let us now consider the significance of a dwelling such as Pique's souterrain. Perhaps the most important symbolic aspect of the souterrain is the fact that Jos helps build it. Being in part his creation, on a metaphorical level, it is also a part of Jos. We shall state, therefore, that the underground dwelling is a metaphor for Jos' unconscious, a black hole where Jos represses unwanted fears and emotions. Obviously there are other more evident symbolic interpretations of this dark hollow in the ground; Hell, Pandora's box or a simple grave, for example. However, let us pass to a description of its traits before we analyze its function.

First of all, the trap door entrance is firmly shut as we see Jos struggle with the latch. This suggests the idea of a place where things are securely locked away. Once inside Pique greets them with *bonjour* even though it's after midnight. This statement tends to emphasize the fluidity of time in his underground home. Inside the interior is described as dull brown and uniform, lacking in luxuries or decoration:

Il n'y avait pas de ces jolies pièces d'étoffe qu'elle laissait traîner autour d'elle dans sa propre maison. Les murs étaient nus. Ici tout était brun, terne. Même le fauteuil était brun! Elle en conclut que l'arrivée de Pique était récente et qu'il n'avait pas eu le temps de décorer son terrier.<sup>12</sup>

It is a formless shape of undefined dimensions where no natural light ever enters. Dark, black and foreboding, the souterrain appears very much to suggest an unconscious filled with quelled

emotions which in Jos' presence tend to remain repressed. For example, soon after the Carbone's departure, Germaine and Pique violently attack each other in a sexual frenzy. Furthermore, Jos is absent during the unleashing of violence and sexuality which occurs at the end of the novel.

Pique makes a very pertinent observation that, in an underground dwelling, "On se sent plus en sécurité."<sup>13</sup> That which remains inside the souterrain is protected from the exterior. However, the reverse is also true. Providing the door is securely fastened, those on the outside are shielded from all that is hidden within. When Myrtie arrives there alone in search of Jos she finds the trap wide open. The open door to the unconscious gives vent to all the repressed emotions within. It is the opening of Pandora's box, containing all kinds of misery and evil. Upon entering, there is a symbolic descent into Hell where she is violently and sexually attacked by an uncontrollable Pierrot. Her attempts at escape are also interesting to note as it entails an ascent. In order to save herself she must rise above the shadowy world, an act which Pierrot obstructs. Shouting *descends* continually he finally throws her to the ground in an effort to lower her to his level. Germaine, in a fit of jealousy, murders Pierrot thus ending the reign of violent emotions. Jos, however, is careful to leave the bodies in the souterrain, using its dark concealed hole to suppress that which he finds disturbing.

So far we have studied the tangible aspects of Jos' unconscious mind but what now of the emotions themselves? At the start of the novel we note a transition which occurs at the

moment when Jos says, "J'aurais besoin de ce calendrier, maudit calendrier!".<sup>14</sup> Exactly at this point Jos suffers a fall to the earth which coincides with his introspective examination of himself and of his relationship with Myrtie. We shall consider this fall as a symbolic fall or, in other words, the emotional commitment involved with falling in love.

Jos begins his philosophizing with a series of questions which seem to deal with Myrtie's fidelity:

L'attendait-elle toujours, Myrtie? Tout le jour et toute la nuit? Etait-elle demeurée fidèle au coin du feu, soufflant sans bruit dans ses vêtements, rêveuse et patiente alors que venait l'aimé à toute allure? Posait-elle la soupe sur le feu dans l'espoir de le voir paraître, franchir la porte d'un pas vainqueur? Et le lit? En avait-elle soigneusement chassé les poussières...<sup>15</sup>

These thoughts seem to reflect a need for stability in his life, a desire to return home and find things exactly as he expects them to be. However, as part of his emotional involvement with Myrtie, Jos leaves himself vulnerable to be hurt and, therefore, suffers the lover's insecurity of doubt in his relationship.

Soon Jos questions his desire. He challenges his very need for Myrtie, recognizing the danger and risk involved in loving her:

Quel besoin avait-il de cette femme? N'allait-elle pas se transformer en monstre, elle aussi? A quoi bon la dévorer de ce souffle brûlant? "Je serai toujours misère!" rugit son cerveau. Pourquoi ces dérangements nocturnes, ces immenses ardeurs, quand on se retrouve au matin aussi chaud qu'une bouilloire, alourdi, déshydraté, rugueux comme une peau de tambour? Le malheur aussi, qui fait l'oiseau au-dessus de la tête, couvre le corps entier de son ombre glacée. L'abandon en plus, le tendre abandon sur le sein, la gueule béante du repos. Halte aux ardeurs! Que faire de tout cela maintenant quand on est seul au coeur de la nuit, qu'il fait froid, humide, et que le moindre oiseau vous jette des horreurs à la figure?<sup>16</sup>



There are many interesting elements of this quote which are worthy of exploring. For example, Jos sets the emotional mood by describing himself as *misère*. Moreover, the narrative use of the verb *rugit* to declare Jos' thoughts implies an unconscious mental torture. The image of *dérangements nocturnes* conjures up the idea of a dark and disturbing unconscious and *immenses ardeurs* intensifies the emotion of the passage. As well, Jos makes direct reference to the bad omen of the bird passing overhead and *malheur* casting a shadow on him. Undoubtedly these elements, combined with the previously mentioned atmosphere of darkness and cold, combine to produce a feeling of danger and foreboding.

The key word here is perhaps *monstre*. Falling in love for Jos means taking a chance and that involves the danger of being hurt or, in other words, the danger that Myrtie will become this monster he fears so much. This idea is repeated elsewhere in the first chapter. As Jos lies next to Myrtie, "Le corps chaud de sa compagne...soudé au sien", he talks about "Une joie effarante...dans tout son corps, une joie palpable et puissante comme un ours qu'on caresse".<sup>17</sup> Myrtie is the bear, an attractive but unpredictable creature with the potential to harm Jos. Therefore, love equals pleasure but also danger and risk. As Jos falls asleep at the end of the chapter his heart is compared to an overloaded vessel which capsizes due to its overflowing cargo. It is an image which expresses a variant of the same idea. His love for Myrtie fills his heart with joy but he pays a price for this elation. As precarious as an overcharged vessel, Jos' existence is fraught with instability and danger caused by his insecure love for Myrtie. She is attractive yet menacing; "...la

plus jolie des sorcières".<sup>18</sup>

Naturally Jos tries to suppress the emotions which trouble him. For instance, as Jos reflects on his life with Myrtie, he is troubled with reoccurring and disturbing thoughts which, lacking the courage to fully consider, he tries to drive from his mind:

Et Jos Carbone pensait: "Pourquoi même pas l'ombre d'une fraîcheur? Pour quelle vie suis-je né? Sur quelle espèce de terre poserais-je les pieds?" Il repoussa ses pensées d'un geste nerveux, se sentant devenir ver de terre dans la terre.

"Ah! je m'irrite", souffla-t-il.

Une fois encore, il n'eut pas le courage d'achever cette pensée agaçante.<sup>19</sup>

The image of an earthworm burrowed into the earth summarizes well the act of repressing these troubling thoughts. Similarly when disquieting images of Germaine begin to dominate his mind, Jos endeavors unsuccessfully to chase her from his thoughts:

Depuis qu'il avait laissé Pique, les idées, les images se bousculaient dans sa tête. Au milieu de ce fouillis, il y avait Germaine trônant comme une reine. Il n'y pouvait rien: qu'il pensât à une toupie grosse comme une maison, à Pique ou à l'automne qui venait, elle lui apparaissait toujours une fraction de seconde avec son sourire étrange et ses cheveux noirs. Chaque fois il sursautait comme s'il venait d'être aveuglé par l'éclair d'une lampe au magnésium.<sup>20</sup>

We have already discussed the role of the souterrain as a symbolic container for Jos' fears but no amount of repression seems to dispel the fear and paranoia evident in several of the other characters. Pique glances anxiously over his shoulder when he fears that the invisible invader might be following Jos and him. Pique's fear is all the more acute when it occurs to him that the invader might not be a man:

Puis, dépité, il pensa qu'il ne pouvait s'agir d'un homme. "C'est dangereux de dire ça, pensa-t-il aussitôt. Si c'est pas un homme..."

L'idée lui fit peur. Il arma son fusil, tira à tout hasard.<sup>21</sup>

What Piques seems to fear most is the possibility that what he is chasing may be a *thing* rather than a person. Of course, this idea ties in well with the notion that Pierrot's character represents intangible and unconscious elements which cannot be hunted or driven off. Myrtie as well demonstrates a paranoid fear of the unseen invader:

Tant qu'il fit jour, elle attendait le retour de Jos sans bouger de sa chaise. Elle voulut lire mais le plus petit craquement dans le murs la rendait folle. La lèvre tremblante elle jetait un coup d'oeil à la fenêtre, derrière elle, sous le lit; elle n'osait même pas se lever de sa chaise. Quand enfin elle reprenait sa lecture, elle était incapable de retrouver le fil de l'histoire.<sup>22</sup>

In both cases we can see that Pique and Myrtie, the characters nearest to Jos, have developed the same anxieties as he. Both these scenes are significant as they occur in Jos' absence and, therefore, indicate that Jos' paranoid fears are firmly established and act independently of him.

Apart from the human and the seemingly inhuman characters in the novel, can we establish another character, that of the forest? If so, what is its relationship to the other characters? From the start of the novel we are given an image of a forest which seems to exhale a "...brume malsaine et opaque...".<sup>23</sup> The same conception of the forest is reiterated as Pique walks to Jos' cabin the morning of their unsuccessful hunt for the intruder:

Vers dix heures et demie de la matinée, Pique déboucha dans la petite clairière des Carbone. L'oeil torve et la barbe longue, il levait très haut les jambes pour éviter la brume légère qui courait à la surface du sol. Il avait les idées plus embrouillées que d'habitude et, superstitieux comme il l'était, il imaginait que cette brume qui lui montait jusqu'aux genoux pouvait lui jeter un sort.<sup>24</sup>

In these two quotes we begin to envision the forest as a living, breathing entity. Furthermore, a somewhat mystical, perhaps even sinister image is projected by these passages. In an effort to draw Pique out of his complacent state by taking advantage of his superstitious nature, Jos verbalizes these ideas to Pique while walking through the night forest to the cabin à noix:

-- Il y a une chose que tu sais pas: dans la forêt, ici, c'est la même chose que dans la jungle. A ce moment-ci de l'année, la terre pourrit. C'est comme quelqu'un qui digère, elle lâche toutes sortes de gaz. Ça m'est déjà arrivé: si t'as le malheur d'en respirer un peu trop, tu rêves. T'es comme un homme qui a des visions. Je te le dis. Tu vas voir, ça sera embrouillé dans ta tête. C'est la preuve, ça, que c'est les gaz." <sup>25</sup>

The forest character is not so much evil as it is completely neutral. Those who are superstitious like Pique project menacing characteristics onto the forest. Jos reinforces that superstition, in effect transmitting his own anxieties to Pique whose character acts as a mirror for those fears. Likewise, the forest seems to mirror the apprehension in the minds of those who walk through it. The intangible mists and unhealthy gases, because of their opaque and threatening nature, reflect the idea of hidden fears and belong to the ongoing metaphor of the human unconscious.

What then is Jos' relationship with the forest? We have noted his need to drive off the invader but what motivates this need and how does it manifest itself? Possession seems to be the key word in his relationships, both with the forest and with Myrtie. Of course, in order to possess the forest Jos must first conquer it. As we have already stated the forest is a neutral character which refuses to take sides. While Jos claims to be

defending his territory, his territory is refusing to be possessed and proves to be more of an obstacle than an ally:

Les mûriers, les framboisiers, la fougère et toute cette cochonnerie qui se pressaient contre ses flancs n'allaient pas le manger. Le végétal entier se pliait sous ses coups.<sup>26</sup>

We note the same determination to subdue and master an uncooperative environment when Jos visits the souterrain for the first time with Myrtie:

Au bout de dix minutes, le passage lui parut si étroit qu'il pensa s'être égaré. Il avait beau aller à tâtons, rentrer la tête dans les épaules, les maudites branches s'acharnaient contre lui. Buvant sa rage à grandes gorgées, Jos prit son parti: il allait les mater par son sang-froid. Il redressa la tête exposa sa figure à leurs coups. Elles frappèrent de plus belle. Stupéfait, il stoppa net. Lui qui avait cru les dompter, il en avait pour son argent!<sup>27</sup>

We have seen how Pique's superstitious nature causes him to see a malicious spirit in the morning mist. Here Jos as well projects a personality into the forest, that of an elusive and mocking adversary that laughs at his attempts to defeat him. The image of an ungraspable and, therefore, indomitable entity frustrates Jos and his need to possess his territory:

Il saisit une branche, tira de toute sa force. Seulement quelques feuilles lui restèrent entre les mains.  
"J'ai l'impression qu'elles rient de moi, les maudites vaches!"<sup>28</sup>

Pique fares no better against an unyielding forest when he is blocked by a bush in attempt to chase Pierrot escaping into the forest. This time an impartial forest allows Pierrot to escape whilst Pique dives "...tête première dans un buisson..." and succeeds in tearing away "...la moitié de la figure".<sup>29</sup>

Possibly a more specific representative of the forest's indifference are the trees for which Jos seems to maintain this same possessive attitude. As he makes his way home to Myrtie at

the beginning of the novel, we note his respectful almost reverent attitude towards the fir tree which he calls *le nôtre*. Moreover, admiring the tall strong maple which Jos uses to perch in, he gives it *une tape amicale* emphasizing that the tree will act as an ally in his attempt to trap Pierrot. The maple serves no such purpose for Jos injures himself falling from the upper branches. In both cases the trees remain quite indifferent to the emotional value that Jos attaches to it.

The tree as an obstacle takes no side as we see both Pierrot and Jos brought down in turn by a similar obstruction. Pique racing to escape Jos fails to notice the roots at his feet and is brought down abruptly. This irony occurs shortly after his attempt to use an elm stump as an accomplice to evade his pursuant:

Il approchait d'un vieil orme couché sur le sol par la foudre. Il obliqua à droite, et, aussi souple qu'un ressort, passa l'obstacle comme un trait.

Le cri de désespoir qu'il attendait ne vint pas. Jos sauta le vieux géant lui aussi.(...)

L'imprudent Pierrot ne vit pas la racine. Il trébucha, roula par terre.<sup>30</sup>

However, Jos can claim no better alliance with the trees as he, carrying Pierrot on his shoulders, falls victim to a tree trunk in a moment of inattentiveness:

Dans sa hâte, il négligea de porter attention aux obstacles. Il courait presque quand, tout à coup, les jambes de Pierrot cognèrent un tronc d'arbre.

Jos n'eut pas le temps de réaliser ce qui se passait. Entraîné par son élan, il tourna sur ses jambes, tomba à la renverse avec son fardeau.<sup>31</sup>

Despite this somewhat detached relationship with the forest, Jos persists in its defence as a matter of territory. Even though its extent is not defined, Jos wishes to rid his domain of invaders. One should note that the chosen territory of both Pique

and Jos are quite different from that of their adversary. Furthermore, the domain that they have chosen seems to, in part, define the inhabitant. For example, Pique who very much fears the forest abides in a souterrain which seems to swallow and possess him. This is naturally the opposite of Jos whose attempts to master the forest cause him to live above ground in a cabin which he has constructed of the forest to suit his purposes. Moreover, his livelihood, based in part on the gathering of nuts to sell in town, suggests a dependance on his environment. It is interesting to note that both these men are so defined by their domains that they are incapable of envisioning the trespasser as living in another type of home than one with which they are familiar. Jos sees Pierrot above ground in a tree whereas Pique's *instinct de taupe* tells him that the intruder will live below ground like he.

Water, specifically the swamp, does not seem to form part of Jos' possession as here is an area of the forest where Jos never ventures:

Jos Carbone n'ignorait pas l'existence du marécage. Plus averti que Germaine, il n'avait jamais osé s'y aventurer. Il savait que la ligne de démarcation des deux territoires était cachée et sournoise. Un bon marcheur pouvait quitter la forêt et se retrouver en plein marécage sans même s'en être rendu compte. Tout cela lui répugnait souverainement.<sup>32</sup>

It is important to note Jos' fear and repugnance of this area as well as the fact that the border between his elected terrain and Pierrot's swamp remains unclear. The swamp seems more or less a continuation of Jos' home and, much like the hidden aspects of the unconscious, it accommodates characteristics which frighten and disgust him.

Pierrot is undoubtedly defined by the aquatic world he inhabits. We note that his association with water entails the creation symbolism of the ocean and, therefore, reflects the idea of a primordial savage state. The examples of Pierrot's connection with water are numerous. For instance, every morning he makes a ritualistic plunge into the cold waters upon which he makes his home:

Pas une seule ride ne gonflait la surface de l'eau. Pierrot tapa du pied pour faire fuir un moineau qui s'était posé près de lui, sauta dans l'eau grasse de la rivière. Ce bain matinal lui fouetta le sang. La tête bien droite, il nagea jusqu'à l'étang. Tous les cents pieds, il arrêtait une minute ou deux pour se reposer.<sup>33</sup>

As well, we observe that, following his drop through the chimney of the Carbone household, Pierrot's first response is to ask Myrtie for drinking water. However, due to the hot embers catching flame on his pants, she is soon drenching him in water to extinguish the flames. In both examples, we find that Pierrot is immersed in water, affirming the connection between Pierrot and the primal state which water symbolizes.

One need only examine the state of Pierrot's domain as described in the narration to acquire an image of his character. Indeed, this is necessary as Pierrot himself is almost never described. It is an area of unstable ground, covered with a vegetation "...qui dissimule et obstrue..." the view of the earth.<sup>34</sup> The fact that only wild animals stalk this domain suggests Pierrot's untamed nature. Above all, there is a constant *silence de mort* which combined with the other facets of hidden danger, mystery and savagery form a portrait of Pierrot and the unconscious mind of Jos as we have defined it.



So far we have discussed many aspects and manifestations of the unconscious both tangible and intangible. We have also noted that the unconscious threat is deeply rooted in Jos' relationship with Myrtie. On a surface level this can naturally be interpreted as a threat to his property. But let us not forget that Pierrot's real obsession is not Jos' forest but Jos' wife. From this confusion of territory and wife springs the multi-faceted role of Myrtie. Therefore, we perceive two basic associations in her character: firstly with the Carbones' cabin and secondly, on a larger scale, with Jos' territory.

The cabin for Jos is the centre of his existence; thus, it is not unusual that Myrtie be associated with it. As the novel begins, Jos' destination is not clear until he cries, "Ma chère Myrtie, mon ange Myrtie, me voilà qui vole vers toi."<sup>35</sup> He proceeds then to describe a Myrtie who waits patiently at home for him, quietly and faithfully cleaning and cooking in the anticipation of his arrival. It is in this first scene that the roles of *foyer* and *femme* are permanently linked. Arriving home, Jos stops to admire the cabin, his creation. Constructed exactly as he wants it, the bed is on the left side, *le côté du coeur*. A passionate reunion follows where Jos declares openly the confusion between *Myrtie* and *Maison*:

...il la serra entre ses bras à lui faire mal, mais, fou comme il l'était, il ne put s'empêcher ce faisant d'examiner amoureusement la maison, répétant dans sa tête: "Elle est belle à mort!" sans trop savoir s'il pensait à Myrtie ou à la maison.<sup>36</sup>

The ambiguity between wife and home is thus confirmed. Jos has created a home at the heart of which is the bed where Myrtie lies sleeping.

One has the impression that Myrtie rarely leaves the sanctuary of the cabin and that her life is more or less confined to household activities. Upon Jos' return, she complains of being bored in his absence. Jos responds, "...je peux pas être ici et là-bas en même temps!".<sup>37</sup> We are thereby given the impression that Myrtie never accompanies Jos on his trips to the unnamed *là-bas*. In another example, Myrtie, surprised by the existence of Pique's souterrain, exclaims, "Il y a une chose que je ne comprends toujours pas...Vous vous êtes installé ici, et moi, je n'en ai rien su. Comment ...".<sup>38</sup> The reason for her ignorance is that Jos has kept her isolated at home, revealing to her the presence of Pique, Germaine and their souterrain only when he thought the time was appropriate. Here again we see a form of possession governing his relationship with Myrtie as Jos seems to maintain strict control over house and wife.

Myrtie's first reference to Pierrot describes him as an invader lurking around the house. This is significant as the initial indication of the menace, occurring in the context of her life within the cabin, also bonds the images of Myrtie and *Maison*. Hence, when Pierrot, obsessed with taunting visions of Myrtie, seeks to take possession of her away from Jos, he heads directly for the cabin. Due to the dual image of Myrtie as both home and wife, his forced entry and trespass into the cabin correspond to a violation of Myrtie. Even his mode of entry, penetration through the chimney, suggests a forced sexual encounter with Myrtie. Indeed, Pierrot later pursues exactly that goal with the idea of having her *par force*. It is at this moment that the two rivals confront each other in the forest. The

question naturally arises as to what Jos is defending: wife, home or territory?

On a larger scale we can see that Myrtie functions as all three of these. Exploring her role as Jos' territory, we see from the beginning many spatial images in the way she is described. For example, Jos confronts Myrtie, demanding to know why she is acting so strangely and her expression is portrayed as a landslide:

-- Pourquoi ris-tu comme ça? Veux-tu me le dire? veux-tu me le dire?"

Sa voix devenait menaçante. Elle s'arrêta tout net, le regarda longuement. Puis, peu à peu, elle prit une toute autre expression. Tout son visage s'affaissa graduellement comme un terrain qui glisse.<sup>39</sup>

With Myrtie, it is often a question of her long blond hair "...tombés sur les épaules..." or "...éparpillés sur la couverture".<sup>40</sup> Again the notion of her long hair flowing over her shoulders or spread out on the bed provides a very spatial image. Later in the novel, she appears in Pierrot's erotic dream illustrated with the same spacial imagery:

Dès qu'il fut endormi, la femme à la robe de daim se déshabilla. Il l'avait vue couchée sur le dos, agitant ses pieds blancs, à plat ventre, sur le côté; l'air moqueur, elle s'était proménée à quatre pattes dans la hutte et lui avait donné de petits coups de seins dans la figure, elle s'était assise face à lui, jambes entrouvertes...De son coucher à son lever, elle parada dans sa tête, silencieuse et pleine de grâce.<sup>41</sup>

Here it is not just Myrtie's hair but her entire body which is stretched out before Pierrot. Naturally this passage has strong sexual connotations but we also note a spatial depiction of Myrtie which evokes the idea of imaginary territory and, once again, Pierrot is portrayed as coveting that terrain.

Another aspect of Myrtie's character which tends to tie her to an image of territory is her role as nourisher. As Jos and Myrtie both live off the land in a hunting and gathering lifestyle, this role of food provider goes well with her territorial image. Even her name suggests the name of a berry and, therefore, food.<sup>42</sup> This idea reoccurs when Pierrot, on his way to the Carbon cabin stops to pick *baies*. Taking these berries corresponds to his intention to take and possess Myrtie.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, as Jos races home to his beloved, we see him hungering for her: "...tout en lui criait famine. Myrtie!".<sup>44</sup> Myrtie is the answer to Jos' famine, both emotional and physical. Emotionally satisfied to be once again at home, Jos wakes to a physical hunger which is also soon satisfied by the soup Myrtie is ready to serve him.

Finally, Jos' desire to defend this territory deals in part with a need to keep it clean. He associates Myrtie with that cleanliness as she waits at home cleaning the bed: "Et le lit? En avait-elle soigneusement chassé les poussières, nettoyé les moindres recoins? Avait-elle rafraîchi les draps et la pesante peau de mouton?".<sup>45</sup>

Part of Pierrot's infringement on this territory, however, is the soiling of it. His act of crushing a rotten apple in Myrtie's face is such an infringement for in doing so Pierrot stains Myrtie and thus Jos' territory. Jos has already stated that intruders do not belong "...dans une forêt si propre"<sup>46</sup> and thereby established Pierrot's role as an unclean element in his domain. Defending Myrtie and forest, therefore, is an act of preservation. It represents a need to see things remain unchanged

and a continuation of the peace he has known for two years of untroubled existence in the forest.

Jos Carbone is a territorial quest, specifically Jos' quest to secure Myrtie as his territory. We see the idea of *pays* equals *femme* echoed in the literature of this era, for example, Hubert Aquin's Prochain Episode.<sup>47</sup> In a novel which heavily stresses the quest for identity, Aquin equates country and woman through the blond female double agent K. One of the possible interpretations often given by literary critics is that K is a metaphor for Québec. Associated with the liberation of a country, K is also the narrator's lost love whom he continually seeks at the terrasse of l'hôtel d'Angleterre.

The confusion of woman and country is again evident in Gaston Miron's poem, "Marche à l'amour".<sup>48</sup> It is essentially a poem of devotion whose declarations of love are intermixed with vivid colours and imagery of the Quebec landscape. The reader is swept away by a spatial movement suggested even from the start by the title. The poet, therefore, expresses simultaneously his love for woman as well as homeland.

We also note the quest for a country or origin in L'Ombre et le double by Yvon Rivard.<sup>49</sup> The author, however, stresses the frontiers of language rather than landscape in a more cerebral and abstract analysis of territory. A fictional world is created in the writing not in the plot as Rivard's novel does not relate much of a story. Essentially, the chronicler Thomas is in jail accused of hampering the birth of a country. Associated with time and troubled by his relationship with *les immortels*, Thomas is an explorer of words who prefers the void of time to the proportions

of space. After Thomas is found innocent, he sets out to find the painter Gaspard and the mysterious Marie. From the beginning, Marie is like an unconscious desire. She speaks to Thomas in his sleep and emerges throughout the text as a glimpsed shadow or a distant voice. She is the living symbol of an unaccessible country; a fact which becomes evident when Thomas eventually finds her at journey's end on eternity's doorstep.

We notice, however, that Benoit does differ somewhat from the other authors mentioned. For instance, in Jos Carbone, the link between woman and homeland is not so evident. Throughout this chapter we have stressed the importance of the unconscious and it is at this level where we find the true fusion of lover and country. As well, we must consider the fact that, unlike the other works to which we have alluded, the narration of the text is in the third person and, therefore, more objective. This is significant as Benoit remains detached from his characters, allowing them to impart their own message. Moreover, Benoit's novel lacks any direct political allusions to Quebec as the story takes place in an entirely fictional setting. Finally, Benoit is neither a poetic or cerebral writer. We expect, therefore, a simplicity and directness to his literary style and an emphasis on action. He is an author who prefers to relinquish control to his characters rather than to dominate or burden them with important truths. Perhaps it is through this freedom that they are able to depict the unconscious world we have discussed in this chapter.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The following definition of the unconscious is given in The Layman's Dictionary of Psychiatry:

In psychoanalysis, that portion of the psyche which is the repository for primitive and repressed memories and impulses and is rarely subject to awareness.

James A. Brussel and George La Fond Cantzlaar, The Layman's Dictionary of Psychiatry (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1967), p.229.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout the novel the importance of night and associated imagery is evident. The mere fact that the majority of the action occurs during the nighttime is evidence of its importance. Germaine's black hair and dress, the dark black earth which stains all who come in contact with it, even Jos' name, Carbone, seems to reflect the blackness of charcoal.

<sup>3</sup> Gabrielle Poulin, "Littérature. Jos Carbone ou la puissance du feu," Relations, No.340, juil.-août 1969, p.208.

<sup>4</sup> Jacques Benoit, Jos Carbone, (Montréal: Stanké, Québec 10/10, 1980), p.9.

<sup>5</sup> Benoit, p.26.

<sup>6</sup> Benoit, p.18.

<sup>7</sup> We are referring to the cover illustration by Gité in the 1980 publication of Jos Carbone, Stanké 10/10.

<sup>8</sup> Benoit, p.20.

<sup>9</sup> Benoit, p.21.

The image of a whistling Pierrot occurs several times throughout the text. For example, When Pierrot appears for the first time: "Soudain, quelqu'un siffla deux ou trois mesures d'une mélodie." (p.58), when Germaine stumbles across Pierrot's raft home: "Elle pensa à se rendre jusque-là par la rive, hésita. Sur l'embarcation, quelqu'un sifflait." (p.62) and again when Pierrot sets out to visit the Carbone cabin in search of Myrtie: "Soudain, il eut peur: il venait de se rendre compte qu'il sifflait depuis qu'il était sorti de l'eau." (p.80).

<sup>10</sup> Benoit, p.21.

<sup>11</sup> Jack Warwick has attempted to identify and analyze the relationship between the North and French Canadian literature in a book entitled: The Long Journey, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1968). He examines both its literal and symbolic character, defining the traditional *pays d'en haut*, literally the country upstream from the colonization site, as well as a symbolic North indicative of a quest for freedom.

However, it is its inhabitants which best incarnate the North and Warwick specifies the Voyager, the Coureur de bois and the Lumberjack. They are the historical rogue adventurers who have fled north in order to escape the rigid confines and authority of the European colony. Freedom seekers, they revolt and adopt a libertine lifestyle which imitates the natives but which contradicts the strict moral codes of the Church.

Of these three it is the Voyager, traditional rebel figure par excellence, who best embodies the Indians' strength, knowledge and harmony, both with his way of life and with his world around him. Warwick makes use of the many literary portrayals of the Voyager to establish these attributes but a general theme of escape or freedom seems to summarize this northern character.

Warwick's study does not profess any psychoanalytical base. However, in describing what he calls the nordic myth of French Canadian literature, the author does approach the idea of the *collective unconscious*. According to Brussel and La Fond Cantzlaar, this is "Jung's term for his concept of inheritance, through the brain structure, of primitive racial ideas and impulses which do not enter consciousness" (p.56).

<sup>12</sup> Benoit, p.29.

<sup>13</sup> Benoit, p.32.

<sup>14</sup> Benoit, p.8.

<sup>15</sup> Benoit, p.8.

<sup>16</sup> Benoit, p.9.

<sup>17</sup> Benoit, p.13.

Jos is making an unconscious reference to the memory of a passed event. However, in the context of his current intimacy with Myrtie, the allusion to caressing a bear is significant. Indeed, through the narrative use of the footnote explaining the origins of Jos' unusual comparison, we are able to discern the link Jos establishes between danger and love or, in other words, the concepts of bear (animal, monster) and Myrtie.

<sup>18</sup> Benoit, p.16.

<sup>19</sup> Benoit, pp.8-9.

<sup>20</sup> Benoit, pp.50-1.



21 Benoit, p.39.

This quote suggests that Pique's fear is approaching the Freudian concept of the *id*. Brussel and La Fond Cantzlaar define this concept as "...the primitive psychic force in the unconscious" and "...the repository for the instincts that are essential to propagation and self-preservation" (p.119). When Pique speaks of the danger involved in verbalizing the idea that their prey may not be human, he is referring to elements of violence, sexuality and primitive instinct which are suppressed in the unconscious precisely because they represent a disturbing threat to the conscious mind. These buried elements make up the *id* and Pique recognizes the risk involved in exploring hidden aspects of his mind which he may find unpleasant.

22 Benoit, p.49.

23 Benoit, p.7.

24 Benoit, p.36.

25 Benoit, p.44.

26 Benoit, p.10.

27 Benoit, p.25.

28 Benoit, p.26.

29 Benoit, p.60.

30 Benoit, p.92.

31 Benoit, p.101.

32 Benoit, p.69.

33 Benoit, p.80.

34 Benoit, p.70.

35 Benoit, p.8.

36 Benoit, p.11.

37 Benoit, p.12.

38 Benoit, p.31.

39 Benoit, p.18.

40 Benoit, pp.20-1.

41 Benoit, p.79.

42 We observe the similarity between the name *Myrtie* and the French word *myrtille*, meaning blueberry.

- <sup>43</sup> Benoit, p.80.
- <sup>44</sup> Benoit, p.9.
- <sup>45</sup> Benoit, p.9.
- <sup>46</sup> Benoit, p.19.
- <sup>47</sup> Hubert Aquin, Prochain Episode, (Montreal: Le Cercle du livre de France, 1965).
- <sup>48</sup> Gaston Miron, The March to Love Selected Poems, (Pennsylvania: Byblos Editions X, 1986).
- <sup>49</sup> Yvon Rivard, L'Ombre et le double, (Montreal: Stanké, 1979).

## CHAPTER II

The Unspoken Message in Les Princes

Jacques Benoit in his fourth novel, Les Princes, has created an allegorical world which succumbs to violent struggle and destruction. In order for an allegory to function, there must be an abstraction or generalization of human behaviour or experience. Indeed, we note the setting for the novel, *la Ville*, is given a generic, and thus universal name. *La Montagne*, the site of the *Château* and location of the ruling power, are also names which illustrate that universality. As well, elements of time and space within the text remain undefined and, therefore, support the allegory. It is through this abstraction that we are able to derive diverse symbolic meanings which we shall now proceed to explore.

In the fantasy topography of *la Ville* and the surrounding Plain, we perceive a correlation with its inhabitants, human, monster and canine. Their struggle relates to their make believe milieu and, therefore, the geography of *la Ville* imparts a nonverbal message. If the environment can communicate without speech, can we not observe an unvoiced meaning conveyed by the inhabitants and their interactions? For nonvocal expression we look to the body itself. The speechless virtue of canine society conflicts with the verbal and corrupt human society. How do we, therefore, link nonverbal bodies such as *natols*, *Coquin grim pant*

and thinking dogs to questions of nature, civility, power and privilege? Let us first of all delve into the geography of *la Ville* as Benoit describes it.

Within the framework of the City's four basic neighbourhoods: Grâligean, Nilaudante, Pétrajie and Coquin grim pant, we note several topographical factors which are worthy of exploring. The most obvious of these of course is the very visible *Château* which is the seat of power in *la Ville*:

...aucune des maisons de Grâligean ne peut cependant rivaliser avec le vaste édifice de pierre brune qui coiffe le sommet de la Montagne. On s'y rend par la Voie royale qui, là-haut, s'élargit considérablement. Nommé le Château, cet édifice abrite les différents services administratifs. Le gouverneur, ses principaux adjoints ainsi que les chefs des milices y ont des appartements privés. Comptant dix étages souterrains et dix étages au-dessus du sol (ce qui en fait de loin le plus haut bâtiment de la Ville), le Château est visible de tous les quartiers, et même de la plaine.<sup>1</sup>

The building's stone construction and multiple underground levels indicate that it is a strong and deep rooted institution. Its size and lofty location make it very conspicuous as a symbol of power and authority but within its walls there is an indication that the structure hides many secrets. Concealed staircases traverse the *Château* but only Krokne ll, the *chef des milices*, can state that he is the "...seule personne dans toute cette Ville à connaître tous les passages secrets du Château,...".<sup>2</sup> As one of our stated aims is to correlate the environment to the occupant we can see how this declaration suggests that Krokne ll plays a major role in the clandestine actions of the ruling *Château* dwellers.

At the opposite end of the topographical spectrum we have the underground passages of *la Ville* and of Coquin grim pant.

Whereas the tunnels under the city are associated with mining and do not extend into Coquin grim pant for safety reasons, the latter has its own network of covered or underground passages which connect homes and businesses in the quarter:

En plus de ses ruelles, le quartier compte une multitude de passages couverts, souvent juste assez larges pour un homme, des maisons que l'on pourrait croire habitées font office de raccourcis...tout ceci sans parler des espèces de couloirs qui seraient ménagés dans l'épaisseur des murs mitoyens d'un certain nombre d'habitations et des nombreuses galeries qui, dit-on, auraient été pratiquées dans les collines et l'ensemble du sous-sol. Au dire de Pétrajie et de Nilaudante, les galeries du Coquin grim pant formeraient un véritable réseau souterrain, comparable à une taupinière géante.<sup>3</sup>

Here we have an image of a dark and dangerous milieu that seems to swallow up and imprison its inhabitants. Moreover, being the home of the poorest and lowest caste of human, the Coquins, the idea of class oppression is intimated.

Considering the allegorical nature of the text, is it not possible to see in the topography of Les Princes an opportunity to reflect upon what Jean-Jacques Rousseau called "l'origine de l'inégalité"? According to Rousseau, human inequality originates in the establishment of society. It is the abandoning of the natural state which creates a loss of innocence in humanity. He sees the development of communal habitats as the beginning of language, family, sexual division of labour, etc. From social growth, however, comes progress and Rousseau envisions this as a step backwards in that it represents a denial of nature which he considers man's proper home:

L'exemple des sauvages qu'on a presque tous trouvés à ce point semble confirmer que le genre humain était fait pour y rester toujours, que cet état est la véritable jeunesse du monde, et que tous les progrès ultérieurs ont été en apparence autant de pas vers la perfection de l'individu, et en effet vers la décrépitude de l'espèce.<sup>4</sup>

We note that, in Les Princes, it is not just a question of the perfection of an individual or the decay of a particular species to which that individual belongs. As *la Ville* is populated with three distinct species, the development of society represents a general decay, both in human society and, consequently, in their relations with other societies. However, Rousseau's ideas on the link between social development through the denial of nature and human inequality seem to have some application in the text. For example, the quarter which houses the rich and powerful only gained prominence with the creation of *la Ville* and, thus, human class inequality finds its origins in the birth of the city:

Le quatrième et dernier quartier porte le nom de faubourg --- le faubourg Grâligeau. Situé à proximité de la rivière Noire, laquelle alimente la Ville en eau potable, le faubourg s'est bâti sur la Montagne. Il y a longtemps, alors que la Ville n'était qu'un village de quelques mesures groupées principalement sur les rives de la rivière Noire, la Montagne ne se distinguait en rien de l'ensemble. La fondation du faubourg comme tel remonterait à l'époque où le village prit le nom de Ville.<sup>5</sup>

Turning to the terrain of the city, we note a completely sterile environment in which human habitation suppresses and denies nature. The fact that the *natol* is the sole living vegetation in *la Ville* certainly reflects this idea. Alluding once again to Rousseau, we note that within the framework of literary history, he is at the onset of the Romantic movement in French literature, a period characterized by an idyllic concept of nature. In this respect, Rousseau's idealization of nature contrasts greatly with the desolate environment portrayed in Les Princes. Here, nature is in decline and appears to function primarily as the habitat of monsters.

Moreover, the monsters' chosen home, the *natol*, very much describes its inhabitants who "...font bande à part et n'ont aucun rapport avec les autres habitants des quartiers où ils vivent".<sup>6</sup> Isolated as their tree city on the plain, monsters are outcasts in human society primarily because of their grotesque appearance. From their dissociation with humans and their close association with nature, i.e. the plain and the *natol*, we can gather a meaning: monsters symbolize human deformation of nature and, ultimately, the corruptive effect of man's power. Let us further clarify this idea.

Monsters embody every physical disfigurement which humans find reprehensible. However, it is interesting to note how human society envisions the origin of monster deformity:

La loi interdit aux hommes Bleus de quitter leur quartier. Pourtant, il arrive que l'un d'eux passe outre. Dénoncé aussitôt par son odeur, l'homme Bleu fait le vide devant lui; hommes, femmes, enfants, tous se réfugient entre quatre murs. Prises d'épouvante, les femmes enceintes fuient droit devant elles, car il suffit, prétend-on, qu'une femme grosse sente de trop près un Coquin pour que son enfant naisse mort-né ou difforme. La croyance populaire n'explique pas autrement l'existence des monstres de toutes sortes qui peuplent la Ville.<sup>7</sup>

Although monsters are shunned by human society, popular human belief, and by this we assume an oral folklore, still takes responsibility for their creation through contact with its own lower class, the Coquins. Just as the image of nature in decay implies its rejection, so too does the monsters' repulsive appearance bespeak the corruption inherent in human class relations. In short, man's interaction with nature produces a grotesque environment; man's interaction with the lower classes of its own society produces a grotesque society.

Geographical names in *la Ville* also suggest a corruption of nature and society. The *rivière Noire*, source of pure drinking water, suggests contamination whereas the poisonous *ruisseau Bleu* implies the inverse. Moreover, the *ruisseau Bleu* crosses all quarters and, therefore, is the common denominator which links all inhabitants of *la Ville*. For most humans it is a sewer useful only for carrying away all refuse. The poisonous water filters their environment as it circulates through Pétrajie, Nilaudante and Grâligean to return to Coquin grim pant from where it originated. The Coquins, however, are very much a part of this river. Immune to the water's toxicity, they depend on the river's garbage for food and clothing as well as share the same bodily stench and blue tint. Although forbidden to leave their quarter, the Coquins' repugnant physical essence is carried by the blue water to all regions of *la Ville*. In this manner, the *ruisseau Bleu* conveys an unpleasant and tangible truth which touches every human neighbourhood regardless of class. The body illustrates the verity, the river makes that truth universal. Coquin body odour and colour suggest a state of decomposition and their social condition implies the decay of human society. Perhaps this is never more apparent as when, near the end of the novel, it overflows its banks, inundating all regions but Grâligean.

In Les Princes, nature and society do not constitute two opposing poles as Rousseau conceives them. They both belong to the same state of decay and, therefore, the notions of animality and civility become blurred in *la Ville*. Certainly, the sophistication of dog society and the brutality of human society seem to illustrate a complete reversal of what we would conceive



to be animal or civil. In addition, traces of nature, specifically animal, are limited in the text. We know that horses exist but only in servitude to humanity. Rats and insects exist and are a major source of protein for all except the Grâligeannois.<sup>8</sup> On the whole, nature is consumed or exploited in a world controlled by humans. In a city which suppresses and deforms nature can there also be a need to dominate? Let us explore the corruption of power in *la Ville*, specifically as it concerns the human domination of canine society.

Whereas tension has always existed between dogs and humans, the most dogs ever suffered was "...quelques coups de pied par-ci par-là...".<sup>9</sup> Historically exploited to kill rats and protected by ancient law for this very purpose, dogs now find themselves a persecuted race. They are trapped within the physical boundaries of *la Ville* and some, like domestic dogs, are imprisoned within the confines of human society as well. Undeniably, dogs are part of human life and are consequently absorbed or consumed by man's more powerful position.<sup>10</sup> This notion of a trapped society is quite evident when the dogs are literally barricaded inside an abandoned home and slaughtered:

"Laissez-les pas sortir! Il faut les tuer là-dedans!"  
A ces mots, prononcés par une voix humaine, les chiens se retournèrent en bloc. Ce qu'ils virent leur glaça le sang: des hommes, l'oeil mauvais, armés qui d'un gourdin, qui d'une fourche, bloquaient la porte, leur haute stature dominant les bêtes.<sup>11</sup>

The canine response is not to flee to the plain but to simply avoid the Coquin grim pant. During the second and final canine slaughter, a group of over five hundred dogs lead by Virnal are trapped when they are "...acculés dans une impasse..."<sup>12</sup> and massacred one by one.

Moreover, because dogs are both a domesticated pet and a source of food, they exist on the frontier between civility and animality. This status further supports their definition as a trapped society in that they are caught between the civilized role of pet and the animal role of prey. The literal act of devouring is an expression of power, a form of domination. It renders that which is eaten into game and imposes upon it an animal role. Man's consumption of dog, therefore, attempts to strip the civil nature of the creature and convert it into prey, little more than flesh to be consumed.

Canine society refutes the role of prey by insisting on the individuality of dogs. For example, when the news is revealed that a member of *le Grand conseil* has been killed and eaten, the speaker hesitates to refer to a fellow dog as simple meat, preferring instead to indicate the name of the dog: "Le petit homme qui vient de mourir a mangé de la viande de chien cet après-midi, de la... viande de Rémieux...".<sup>13</sup> Giving a name to the slaughtered dog depicts it as a murder victim rather than a source of food and thereby reinstates and affirms its civility. In addition, we note that vengeance is not a priority of the animal world yet dogs retaliate against humans who attempt to treat them as prey. Shortly after the dog's death is announced, the news is revealed that "Rémieux est vengé!".<sup>14</sup> Both the identification and avenging of Rémieux represent a refutation of the animal role which humans impose on them.

Dogs are characterized by a sense of nobility and superiority to their supposed human masters. Even the name, Prince, and for that matter the title of the novel suggest

nobility. Although verbally they cannot express superiority in human language, various body gestures support this idea. From the beginning we remark how the émissaire Prince takes care to leap a puddle of urine when the Coquin walks through it barefoot. Pride in nonservility reflects this attitude as well. Virnal at the canine assembly boasts that he has no *maître humain*.<sup>15</sup> As well, the monster Makribi observes that Virnal's initial gesture is an attempt to kill him and comments that such an action shows he is not a domestic dog.<sup>16</sup> Indeed the noble image they portray renders ironic their name used as an insult. When Ronule and Makribi attempt to sell overpriced dog meat to a penniless crowd of hungry Coquins, the angry mob shouts, "...`Trop cher!`, `Voleurs!`, `Chiens!`...".<sup>17</sup> The question immediately arises as to who in *la Ville* represent the real *chiens*? Even Méliba, Grâligean's spy in the Coquin grim pant, refers to the militia and its authority by saying, "Les chiens sont meilleurs qu'eux autres...".<sup>18</sup> It should also be noted that, in contrast to the savage Coquins, the dogs' society is extremely ordered and cooperative and, thus, depicts ideal human social values.

The ruling class residents of Grâligean and its *Château*, are that authority and are characterized by prosperity and power derived from their mines and militiamen. Rousseau raises the question of legitimate power within society. Social inequality, such as exists in *la Ville*, is due to a series of social changes stemming from the establishment of property, government and, finally, despotic power:

Si nous suivons le progrès de l'inégalité dans ces différentes révolutions, nous trouverons que l'établissement de la loi et du droit de propriété fut son premier terme, l'institution de la magistrature le second, que le troisième

et dernier fut le changement du pouvoir légitime en pouvoir arbitraire; en sorte que l'état de riche et de pauvre fut autorisé par la première époque, celui de puissant et de faible par la seconde, et par la troisième celui de maître et d'esclave, qui est le dernier degré de l'inégalité, et le terme auquel aboutissent enfin tous les autres, jusqu'à ce que de nouvelles révolutions dissolvent tout à fait le gouvernement, ou le rapprochent de l'institution légitime.<sup>19</sup>

We remark that the Grâligeannois own the mines and, therefore, the wealth of *la Ville* as well as govern with no sense of justice as they consider themselves exempt from *la loi canine*. It would seem that, according to Rousseau, *la Ville* is in the final stage of social inequality; the phase where legitimate power is sacrificed to tyrannical rule.

The body of a Grâligean resident communicates the impression of innate physical frailty. For example, the son of the *seigneur de Maistries* succumbs due to the consumption of tainted dog meat which he is physically unable to digest. Unlike the Coquins, they are not immune to the waters of the ruisseau Bleu. Power, therefore, does not come to them from physical strength. On the contrary, they depend heavily on all societies, human and otherwise, to support their rule. From the monsters comes the physician Makribi, the only one of his species allowed to enter the confines of the *Château*. The governor, though disgusted by the monster's appearance, has need of his medical expertise for his condition. For a source of food, the Grâligeannois rely on the canine society even though dogs are protected by law. Lastly, they recruit miners and militiamen from the working class quarter known as Pétrajie for labour and protection. Rousseau again notes that the ruling of the weak is another unnatural state in that it goes against nature's own law of the survival of the fittest. Wealth and the ownership of property requires the establishment

of laws to protect it. Therefore, the rich soon learn to manipulate the lower classes into the maintenance of their counter nature existence.

Grâligean authority is based on an incorrect articulation of reality, a verbal misrepresentation of the way things are. For example, Kroknell has no difficulty in orchestrating the final canine slaughter, given the tension which still exists in *La Ville*. He profits from human distrust and misunderstanding of canine society to spread untruths concerning dogs and thereby initiates the violence. Dogs are unable to refute human discourse as they are incapable of communication in human terms. When Virnal tries to communicate with humans via a third party, the monster Makribi, the attempt ends in failure as Makribi states categorically that he is not the *envoyé des chiens*.<sup>20</sup> As we have seen, the dogs rely on nonverbal expression: self-poisoning, violent reprisal and bodily expressions of nobility and superiority. Let us turn now to an examination of the Coquins to observe the nonvocal manner in which they refute Grâligean domination.

Coquin grim pant is the quarter most feared and least understood. We have already mentioned its dark subterranean elements. But what of the Coquins, the Blue men as they are otherwise called. In an obscure and dangerous environment, even their name *Coquin* implies treachery. From a surface prospective their animal nature is most noticeable. Savage and territorial creatures they lead a barefoot and isolated existence. Like animals they mate instead of marry. They are a fertile race who bear their children in multiple births and pick up the young by

the scruff of the neck. Most important in the animal image is the idea of survival of the fittest. Coquins show no interest in helping others of their race and fight for the few scraps of sustenance which exist in their environment. To this extent they represent the opposite of Rousseau's idea of natural man in that they exhibit no innate idea of pity or compassion towards others of their race. According to Rousseau, compassion is the elemental emotion which reason destroys:

Il est donc bien certain que la pitié est un sentiment naturel, qui, modérant dans chaque individu l'activité de l'amour de soi-même, concourt à la conservation mutuelle de toute l'espèce. C'est elle qui nous porte sans réflexion au secours de ceux que nous voyons souffrir; c'est elle qui, dans l'état de nature, tient lieu de lois, de mœurs et de vertu, avec cet avantage que nul n'est tenté de désobéir à sa douce voix: c'est elle qui détournera tout sauvage robuste d'enlever à un faible enfant ou à un vieillard infirme sa subsistance acquise avec peine, si lui-même espère pouvoir trouver la sienne ailleurs...<sup>21</sup>

Certainly, Ronule's squabbles for food in the ruisseau Bleu or his indifference towards the wounded Coquin he sees stumble out the door of the *taverne du Porc* would seem to indicate a lack of *pitié* as Rousseau calls it.

The Coquin society is one steeped in impotence. Their dependance on the whims of the ruisseau Bleu and the garbage other neighbourhoods throw away indicates a lack of control over their condition. Day to day survival is not determined by them but by the fortune of what floats by. Furthermore, Coquins are powerless to leave their impoverished quarter and are therefore confined to these circumstances.

Naturally, frustration arises from the inability to control ones destiny. When Ronule returns empty handed and unable to provide food for his family, his enraged mate Gamelle chases him

out to resume his food search in the ruisseau Bleu. In a barren environment, of course, his task is made all the more difficult and when he is robbed of his prize chunk of greenish meat, Ronule can stand no more. He vents his frustration by kicking the small dog he finds when exiting the water and walks off "...sans but, la tête pleine de cette viande qui lui avait échappé,...".<sup>22</sup>

The frustration, the hunger, and especially the incapacity to change or overcome his plight, all combine to form a situation which ignites with the acquisition of a mysterious club. Made of a hard wood, it is unlikely that it is made from the *natol* as, "Vu l'absence de toute autre espèce de végétation, il est strictement interdit, pour quelque raison que ce soit, d'abattre ces arbres."<sup>23</sup> This observation assumes it is a foreign element introduced into the situation at an opportune time. A simple theft at first, we note that once the club is in his possession, changes begin to occur in Ronule:

...il s'arrêta, à bout de souffle, pour palper l'arme qu'il venait de dérober. Le bâton, qui lui arrivait presque au cou, était fait d'un bois très dur et pesait autant que s'il eût été en métal, du moins il parut tel à Ronule. Il le tâta longuement, à l'aveuglette, de ses mains moites de sueur, puis, sans bien savoir ce qu'il faisait, emporté par une sorte d'ivresse, il retourna à grands pas à la taverne du Porc.<sup>24</sup>

The club is a symbol of power, something Ronule has never held, and represents a move from savagery to the civilized usage of tools. Contrary to the written law, it represents a nonverbal expression of power. Once in his possession, it has a marked effect on him and he is described as being carried away by a sort of inebriation. Driven by frustration and the animal instincts of survival, Ronule uses this power and kills a dog in a machine like, almost unintentional gesture:

La tête lui tournait et, un moment, il pensa à partir. Puis il se dit qu'il allait chasser les chiens avec son bâton et lécher ce qui resterait de sang quand soudain l'un d'eux, le plus petit, marcha vers lui pour s'arrêter à l'extrême limite du halo de lumière. Ronule éleva machinalement son bâton; il fit un pas, abattit son gourdin sur la bête. Les reins brisés nets, l'animal tomba sur le ventre avec un faible soupir.<sup>25</sup>

Killing a dog is a simple and direct physical refutation of the Grâligean's verbal law. With one swift body motion Ronule has reversed the nature of his predicament and is thus completely transformed. He has taken control of his existence and the changes are numerous. No longer in fear of his environment, he takes the quickest route home along streets and galleries "...propices aux embuscades". Furthermore, "Sa fatigue, sa faiblesse et même sa faim..." have disappeared so that he no longer feels the weight of the club and dog.<sup>26</sup> Confidence and strength, therefore, are expressions of this transformation. Let us continue to explore the body language of Ronule's defiance.

The killing of the dog signifies the start of a breakdown of taboo concerning canine society. Conditioned by the nobility to fear the militia and the laws they enforce, the Coquins have never questioned that authority. Therefore, when Ronule proudly brings home his prey, Gamelle echoes the standard Coquin sentiment by saying: " --- On n'a pas le droit."<sup>27</sup> This is again evident in the *taverne au Trou*, where the Coquin patrons and especially the owner Petit Louis are shocked at Ronule's repetition of his feat. Conditioned to fear that which they are taught is incorrect, Ronule terrorizes the cliental by violently butchering and devouring his second dog. Typically, Petit Louis cleans away the blood and buries the corpse so as to suppress any



disruption to the impotent yet secure society he has known. Here we have another nonvocal expression. By publicly butchering the dog, Ronule is making an unspoken announcement to his fellow Coquins which if verbalized would state that they need no longer respect Grâligeau authority just because they are told to. In short, Coquins are capable of controlling their own destiny.

Simply put, Ronule is no longer content to passively wait for meals to float by in the ruisseau Bleu for he can actively hunt his own prey. He is reveling in his new found power. His physical assault of the drunk in the same pub where he butchers the dog, therefore, is not so much an act of cruelty as it is another speechless demonstration of newly acquired aggression.

Furthermore, Ronule's attitude spreads quickly to other Blue men. The pub patrons who witness the slaughter are symbolically baptised with dog's blood as Ronule tosses its heart, "...crachant de sang au milieu des buveurs...".<sup>28</sup> However, whereas a baptism ceremony has a civil, religious function, here we see a reversal of symbolism. Although maintaining a form similar to a sacred event, the Coquins' actions reveal a brutal, animal like nature. Moreover, violence and disobedience to the law are the results of the Coquin baptism and again we see a reversal of the Christian ceremony.

Ronule's act constitutes another physical gesture which communicates a meaning. Once tainted with the blood, the onlookers are converted to Ronule's way of thinking which is the rejection of verbal law in favour of animal survival. Those that gather at the ruisseau Bleu the following day discuss and repeat the violent event with more converts:

Le Coquin arrivé en dernier s'avança sans bruit et, à la surprise des autres, il se jeta de tout son long sur l'animal. Un hurlement de terreur échappa à l'épagneul qui glissa dans l'eau avec son assaillant.(...)

Le hurlement de l'animal avait glacé les Coquins groupés sur la rive et, pendant un long moment aucun ne bougea. Puis l'un d'eux, enfin, se décida à entrer dans l'eau et, l'instant d'après, ils étaient quatre ou cinq dans le ruisseau, à taper sur le chien à coups de poings.<sup>29</sup>

Again the idea of baptism is intimated by the immersion in the ruisseau Bleu. It is also ironic that the movement to take charge of their fate gains momentum in the very river that has always symbolized the impotence of the Coquins. The ruisseau Bleu recalls the creation symbolism of water, the cleansing of old ways, in brief, a symbolism which suggest a rebirth in thinking.

The solemnity of the occasion is further emphasized when the dead dog's paw is passed around and tasted by a small group of Coquins in a act which resembles a communion ceremony: "Elle fit le tour et chacun goûta à la viande, puis elle revint au propriétaire du couteau."<sup>30</sup> Whereas the Christian ceremony affirms the initiation into a group on a spiritual level, food for the soul so to speak, the Coquin act is again a reverse symbolism as it denotes initiation into a group but only on a physical level. It is food for the body; the instinctual animal search for nourishment.

The nonverbal indications of impending change are evident in the text. To reiterate, we have a dominant human society where the poor are frustrated and powerless in a sterile environment and the wealthy maintain an artificial luxury dependant on all other classes and races in the City. However, the end of Grâligeon dominance seems evident and is most graphically symbolised by the gangrenous limbs of the governor. Rinalobule's

power is falling into decay just as is his body. Furthermore, the death of twenty-three of the *Château's* youth due to the consumption of poisoned dog, indicates a heavy blow to the future of Grâligean. The destruction of their youth means an era is coming to a close. As the vice-gouverneur climbs the stairs to visit his dying son, he encounters a fallen torch which he does not stoop to pick up. The light symbolises a decline of their empire and even his son's name, Miclô, suggests closure and end.

In dog society, Virnal receives a similar bad omen when he encounters the deformed body of a black raven just before setting off into the plain in search of Makribi:

Peu avant d'arriver à l'orée de la plaine, le chien croisa une vieille femme habillée de noir qui promenait au bout d'une ficelle un corbeau à moitié déplumé; l'oiseau avait l'anus bombé, de la grosseur d'une tête de chiot. A cause de son infirmité, il marchait en se déhanchant d'une manière comique. La vieille s'arrêta et regarda passer le chien en ricanant; pris d'une peur irraisonnée, Virnal fonça à toutes jambes vers la plaine.<sup>31</sup>

The ominous message of this passage is evident. An elderly woman in mourning and the black raven are both symbols which do not augur well for the dogs' future. Moreover, we also note the leash, symbol of domestication and servility in canine society. Virnal, faced with such an image, flees into the plain in terror with the unrealistic hope of finding salvation in Makribi, a monster whose existence is only rumoured.

Near the end of the novel, the narration adopts a journalistic style which augments the verisimilitude of the events. Incidents are related to us as if they were well documented historical events, often with an approximate time:

Vers les deux heures et demie du matin, alors que tout dormait, environ deux mille hommes Bleus --- ou soi-disant hommes Bleus, comme l'affirmèrent plus tard les authentiques

Coquins, encore qu'on n'ait jamais vraiment su qui ils étaient --- environ deux mille hommes Bleus, venus, dit-on, de la plaine, se répandaient subrepticement dans le Coquin grim pant.<sup>32</sup>

The reality of the more grotesque events is all the more strengthened by references to a written history of *la Ville*:

Au cours de la nuit, si l'on en croit les annales, les habitants du quartier firent sept ou huit bûchers du genre. Le plus gros, qu'on dressa en plein centre de Pétrajie, aurait été constitué de plus de deux mille chiens. Les flammes, prétend-on, montaient plus haut que le Château et éclairaient toute la Ville.<sup>33</sup>

The historical like references in these quotes seem to imply another human distortion of truth as the narrator in both cases sheds doubt on the verity of the facts stated. Whereas verbal or written history seems to recall and misrepresent the past, placing the blame for the slaughter unjustly on Coquin society, the blood stained body of military commander Kroknell states a present time truth that he and his militia are responsible. Just as his culpability is expressed nonverbally, so too does the final gesture of Pétrus and Nina, killing and mutilating Kroknell, communicate an unspoken message of revenge and defiance.

To return full circle and once again examine the topography of the text, we note that in the map which the author supplies for us, the shape of *la Ville*, the actual body of the city so to speak, is not unlike an egg. Could there be a rebirth symbolism evident in the body of *la Ville* and, therefore, in the text itself? As well, what can we perceive from the molehill image of Coquin grim pant? Its underground galleries are fertile ground for the germination of new ideas. Fecundity and durability, both important to the Coquin's survival, help these ideas take root.

Finally, we note the fairy-tale aspect of the *Château* and, therefore, of its inhabitants way of life. Does this suggest the eventual demise of Grâligeon society?

It is difficult to say what new order would spring from the end of Grâligeon rule. Each race has always managed its own affairs and there seems no reason to believe that this would change given the diversity and the lack of communication between the three societies. Certainly, the human society has lost credibility but with the canine population decimated and the monsters remaining neutral, it seems unlikely that there will be an end to human supremacy in *la Ville*. Change is most likely to occur in the form of a reformation of the class structure in the least socially developed of the three races, the human race. Yet could the animal like Coquins dominate *la Ville* in a less violent fashion than their Grâligeon counterparts? Would Coquin rule alter human interaction with the other two species as a result? Finally, from where would they derive their authority to rule?

Authority to govern, according to an article by Diderot in L'Encyclopédie, is derived from either brute force or the consent of those who are governed:

Aucun homme n'a reçu de la nature le droit de commander aux autres. La liberté est un présent du ciel, et chaque individu de la même espèce a le droit d'en jouir aussitôt qu'il jouit de la raison. Si la nature a établi quelque *autorité*, c'est la puissance paternelle: mais la puissance paternelle a ses bornes; et dans l'état de nature elle finirait aussitôt que les enfants seraient en état de se conduire. Toute autre *autorité* vient d'une autre origine que la nature. Qu'on examine bien et on la fera toujours remonter à l'une de ces deux sources: ou la force et la violence de celui qui s'en est emparé, ou le consentement de ceux qui s'y sont soumis par un contrat fait ou supposé entre eux et celui à qui ils ont déferé l'*autorité*.<sup>34</sup>

As previously stated, residents of the Coquin grimpant are characterized by strength and fertility. They are capable of assuming power but it would be control secured through violence and force. Yet would this not represent a step backwards, a regression back to a savage state where might rules? The fertile and robust image of Coquin society does not give cause for optimism as it represents no creative or positive force in *la Ville*. No class in human society appears to have the answer. While monster and dog continue to evolve, man continues to devolve. Perhaps the only solution is an end to human domination in *la Ville* but the text only hints at this conclusion and the reader is left to speculate.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Benoit, Les Princes (Montréal: Stanké, Québec 10/10, 1981), p.21.

<sup>2</sup> Benoit, p.79.

<sup>3</sup> Benoit, pp.15-6.

<sup>4</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité (Paris: Librairie Larousse, 1972), p.71.

<sup>5</sup> Benoit, p.20.

<sup>6</sup> Benoit, p.25.

<sup>7</sup> Benoit, pp.19-20.

<sup>8</sup> When Makribi suggests to the governor that the Grâligeannois should imitate the monsters and eat rats and insects, he replies, "--- Nous n'aimons ni le rat ni les insects." (p.120).

<sup>9</sup> Benoit, p.62.

<sup>10</sup> Unlike monsters, dogs order their society according to the geographical boundaries of human neighbourhoods and inhabit *la Ville* instead of the plain. For example, in the first chapter description of the complex canine society we learn that at least two levels of their hierarchy, the *chefs de groupe* and the *savants*, are organized according to the four human quarters. This is evident in the way in which they define themselves at the canine monthly assembly: " -- Mon nom est Bartouflu. Je suis chef de groupe du troisième secteur de Pétrajie..." (p.58) and again, "Mon nom est Virnal,...Je suis savant du cinquième secteur de Nilaudante" (p.70).

<sup>11</sup> Benoit, p.145.

<sup>12</sup> Benoit, p.168.

<sup>13</sup> Benoit, p.66.

<sup>14</sup> Benoit, p.65.

<sup>15</sup> Benoit, p.70.

<sup>16</sup> Benoit, p.95.

- 17 Benoit, p.156.
- 18 Benoit, p.138.
- 19 Rousseau, pp.85-6.
- 20 Benoit, p.121.
- 21 Rousseau, pp.58-9.
- 22 Benoit, p.38.
- 23 Benoit, p.13.
- 24 Benoit, p.39.
- 25 Benoit, p.40.
- 26 Benoit, p.41.
- 27 Benoit, p.42.
- 28 Benoit, p.109.
- 29 Benoit, pp.127-8.
- 30 Benoit, p.130.
- 31 Benoit, pp.86-7.
- 32 Benoit, pp.163-4.
- 33 Benoit, pp.166-7.
- 34 Denis Diderot, L'Encyclopédie ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, I (Paris: Briasson, David, Le Breton, Durand, 1751), 898.



## CHAPTER III

## The Narrative Voyage of Grégoire Rabouin

Jacques Benoit's most recent novel, Gisèle et le serpent, contains many fantastic elements situated in a contemporary Montreal setting. It is a work which presents a spatiality incorporating the ideas of continual transportation and transformation, displacement, erratic movement, in short, a text in constant motion which throws the reader into a state of flux. The text forms an imaginary universe teeming with fantastical elements which have no lôgic in themselves. Therefore, we must explore a deeper level of the text to uncover meaning in the overwhelmingly violent and sexual adventures of the principal character, Doctor Grégoire Rabouin and the protagonist, Gisèle Ribeault.

Rabouin, is both hero and narrator and the text, written in the first person narrative style, exists as both his story and as his creation. However, the confirmation that Grégoire is the actual author of the text is displaced at the end of the novel in the epilogue. The uncertainty created by this withheld information enhances the play between the real and the unreal in the novel. Rich in meaning, the epilogue begins with his explanation for writing the text and ends with an affirmation that what the reader holds in his hand is indeed the literary creation of the narrator, Rabouin:

...je me jurai de raconter ce que le lecteur m'a fait l'honneur de lire.(...)

Ma seule inquiétude concerne mes enfants à qui je n'ai jamais soufflé mot de tout cela. La solution --- s'ils me croient dérangé --- est tout trouvée: je n'aurai qu'à prétendre qu'il s'agit bel et bien d'un roman, comme j'ai eu la précaution de faire indiquer sur la couverture.<sub>1</sub>

His decision to write the novel emanates from Gisèle's refusal to be the destined audience for the ideas expressed in his text. She, in effect, denounces the content of his story. After his marriage with Gisèle, his fantasies of magical disruption are no longer an approachable subject and there is a denial of the past and the aberrations which came before:

Jamais, toutefois, il n'était question entre nous de l'infirmité dont j'étais affligé (elle ne s'en formalisait pas une miette, d'ailleurs) ni des aventures ni des tourments que j'avais traversés.<sub>2</sub>

As well, during an evening dinner in Paris, Grégoire attempts to bring up the subject of their adventures with the serpent Toutou and is quickly hushed by Gisèle. Faced with a conservative bourgeois lifestyle and a lack of communication with his wife, perhaps the doctor has no choice but to express his fantasies to the reader in a symbolic written account and, in so doing, creates the text. It is Gisèle's reluctance to listen to his story which suggests that Grégoire must express himself in a fantasy format and, in the context of his imaginative narration, we are free to derive alternate meaning in its episodes.

We have noted that the text is his creation and, indeed, within the text there are several indications that Rabouin's secret desire is to be a writer and that his life within the confines of a medical office is a practical way to make his living but not his real passion. This he admits near the start of his text as he describes himself in Red Square with Gisèle:

*Moscou!* Moi qui, dans ma jeunesse, lisait avidement Tchekhov, médecin comme moi, et rêvais de devenir écrivain comme lui. Mais, bien sûr, une paresse crasse et le manque de talent me faisaient remettre l'affaire d'année en année et je n'avais jamais écrit une ligne.<sup>3</sup>

It is also significant that when Rabouin presents the *cahier noir* to the Abbé Noyer as proof of the existence of demons, the clergyman considers it to be the doctor's creation and comments on his creativity:

"Vous êtes médecin, mais vous auriez fait aussi un très bon romancier, dit-il finalement en me le remettant avec un mince sourire. Un Tchèquev moderne. Vous avez beaucoup d'imagination."<sup>4</sup>

To summarize, we have a situation where the narrator Rabouin admits to the reader that he has a desire to be a writer but doubts he is capable. On one level of the text, the doctor apparently lacks the confidence to pursue his dream to write yet one of the created characters of his narration is contradicting him and stating that, yes, Rabouin can be a writer like Chekhov. Just as Gisèle denies the fantasized adventures in the doctor's narrative, so does Noyer deny the actuality of the magical events described in the text. Moreover, his literary praise of the notebook represents both a confirmation of Rabouin's secret passion for writing and a fantasized realization of that passion.

We note as well that key elements of the final chapter may represent the inspiration for the text as a whole. For example, the Russian novel concerning an invasion of demons in Moscow, by the short description given, seems to parallel Grégoire's story in its plot and partially in its setting as Rabouin is abducted and incarcerated in a Moscow jail cell in chapter one of his account. As well, Rabouin's visit to his mother in hospital alludes to his medical profession and, therefore, to the doctor

role he plays as hero of his text. Lastly, characters of his narration are referred to in this hospital. The overheated radiators, a serpentine symbol, recall the demon snake Toutou and the *homme sans tête* he sees pass in the corridor is, of course, Brazeault, one of Toutou's mutilated victims. Since Grégoire's personal experiences described in the epilogue precede the actual creation of the novel and, at the same time, mimic the aberrations described therein, can we not perceive a link between the doctor's personal life and an imagined one, in other words, between his real life experience and a fantasized experience expressed in his narration?

The transformation of these elements into a novel with Rabouin being the self-proclaimed author indicates the idea of a narrative journey of discovery. Like a forest that the hero explores, the text can be seen as an imaginary universe where the raw material of the doctor's fantasies become developed and take body in the text. The displacement between this imaginary universe and the conventional world is allowed by various open doors and connecting links, such as the epilogue. These links permit a metaphorical interpretation of fanciful elements in the text such that they can signify truths about the doctor/author.

The doctor's role of writer and hero poses interesting problems, specifically concerning Gisèle's character. It should be noted that she never actively speaks for herself. Her actions and words are related to us via Rabouin's narration and, therefore, she too may exist solely as his literary creation. Essentially, it is left up to the reader to decide whether she exists or whether she is just a fantasy of the narrator. This

uncertainty concerning her status urges us to examine how she as a force acts in Grégoire's life; not as Gisèle, the bourgeois housewife but as Gisèle, active agent in the doctor's psyche.

The play between the two narrators, between Gisèle's notebook and Grégoire's novel, establishes the confusion of Gisèle Ribeault and Grégoire Rabouin. It is the same ambiguity which is at the nucleus of the novel and which propels the erratic movement of the text. The central confusion between reality and illusion, existence and nonexistence, writer and character all stem from this core duality. As we can see by the following quote, the doctor admits this identity confusion with Gisèle:

J'empoignai le cahier noir, je l'ouvris et --- comme la foudre --- l'idée me frappa que c'était moi qui avais écrit cette confession.

Bref, pendant les quelques instants que dura ma folie, je crus que j'étais Gisèle Ribeault. N'avais-je pas travaillé adolescent comme garçon de courses à Radio-Canada pendant un été? n'avais-je pas, à vingt ans, été marié à une Suédoise prénommée Barbie, avec qui j'avais divorcé quelques années plus tard?

Sauf pour le sexe et des détails, nous étions, l'autre G.R. et moi, la même personne: elle avait elle aussi travaillé à Radio-Canada, son mari --- plutôt que sa femme---, elle le nommait dans sa confession Barbiche, ou plus brièvement Barbi.<sup>5</sup>

But what meaning can we gather from this confusion of two characters whose name, past histories as well as narrator roles resemble each other? If we postulate that the correspondence between the two individuals suggests that Gisèle represents a projection of the doctor's inner needs and aspirations, then her experiences may tell us something about his character. For example, the chapter IV quotation of the *cahier noir*, or *hallucinante confession* as the doctor calls it, could contain relevant clues to Grégoire's own character in that we may

perceive in each one of Gisèle's achievements a desire on the doctor's part to emulate her. We have stated that Rabouin's dual role as both hero and narrator supports the idea that Gisèle may be his literary creation. In this respect, she may also represent a spokesperson for his hidden feelings. Moreover, does not a confession represent the initial declaration of an inner conflict and, therefore, could it not, in Rabouin's case, signify the beginning of a personal revelation, the launching of an introspective voyage, so to speak? Let us take a closer look at Gisèle's *cahier noir* with a view to identifying the significance of events in her life in terms of the doctor's character.

Gisèle's physical and emotional metamorphosis through the advent of a talking snake called Tournoukriel or Toutou depicts a rebirth of her corporeal beauty. The serpent's physical presence inside of her is often referred to as an impregnation. For example, Gisèle likens herself to a pregnant woman who feels "...les coups de pieds de son foetus".<sup>6</sup> The image of pregnancy implies a rebirth that she owes to the serpent. However, we may also see this as a sincere desire on the doctor's part to himself be reborn. There is in this quote a suggestion of Gisèle's fecundity concerning Grégoire's writing. She is the inspiration for Rabouin's creativity, an image enhanced by the parallel between the image of a kicking foetus and one of Gisèle's functions in the text. Throughout the story, Rabouin assigns Gisèle the role of shaking up his monotone lifestyle. She is, in conjunction with Toutou, this kicking foetus in the stomach of the blossoming writer.

As the *cahier noir* describes it, Gisèle begins to waste away in a state of depression due to a sexless marriage with a dominating husband she calls Barbi. Moreover, her husband lacks creativity. This is evident when Gisèle states that "...il n'a jamais accouché d'une seule pensée philosophique originale...".<sup>7</sup> By exchanging Barbi for the serpent Tournoukriel, Gisèle effectively abandons the rational and intellectualized world of her philosopher husband for the emotional and physical satisfaction her serpent gives her. Once again, Gisèle is associated with a fertile and productive state. Her fanciful character is the means by which Rabouin will have the opportunity to express his creativity. Like the birth image in the previous example, the genesis of original thought is her contribution to Rabouin.

These observations taken from the black notebook and applied to Rabouin indicate that he is frustrated by a rational profession and, therefore, would like to renounce his rational side and achieve a liberation by following a more creative path. Rabouin's desire to write is connected to his craving for creativity. The unblocking of his creative expression is represented by ideas of seduction, confinement, or literal loss of control and nowhere is that better depicted than in his relationship with Gisèle. Her attractive and constantly changing character is the embodiment of the active power of the writer and the magic power she exerts over Rabouin helps to liberate his creative drive. The displacement and metamorphosis brought about by these magic effects, therefore, permit a leap from reality into an imaginary universe, a jump which, in the doctor's case,

represents a change from the reality level of his social and professional life to a level of fantasy hidden below the surface.

Rabouin's narrative descriptions of Gisèle emphasize her sexual attractiveness. At the terrasse, the doctor refers to Gisèle as *souverainement appétissante*. In the Moscow prison she is "...plus belle que jamais, toute rose dans une robe rouge incroyablement moulante".<sup>8</sup> Finally, at the mental institution, her semi-transparent nurse's uniform causes Rabouin to remark that she must make the insane *à moitié fous*. Captivated by her beauty, Grégoire's enchantment with Gisèle suggests a fairy-tale form to the story, an interpretation which would coincide well with Gisèle's magic power. Moreover, the doctor's obvious infatuation for Gisèle, albeit somewhat sexual, supports her role as a magical influence in his fantasies.

As Gisèle's character is perpetually depicted with Tournoukriel, she reflects serpent connotations such as the idea of constraint or confinement. This is evident from the moment when the doctor recognizes his ex-patient at the terrasse and, "...pris d'une peur aussi soudaine qu'inexplicable...", struggles to loosen his necktie.<sup>9</sup> Naturally the ensuing incarceration in a Russian prison also reflects this notion of being trapped. We must also remark the two places where Grégoire wakes up during this episode: firstly in a cell in a Moscow prison and secondly in bed naked with Gisèle. In this episode, the doctor is captivated in its most literal sense and not just charmed by Gisèle's attractive appearance. We note also the idea of displacement which reconfirms the magic ability to make large jumps between fantasy and reality.



Rabouin's narration provides us with further examples of magic and fairy tale. For example, the doctor often portrays Gisèle as the enchantress who casts a spell over him. At the terrasse she offer's him *COUAC*, an inebriating drink which can be seen as a sort of witch's potion that brings Grégoire under her control. This magic or mystical side to Gisèle relates well to religious associations evident in the text. Indeed, Rabouin is tempted and bewitched by Gisèle who he describes as *endiablée*. Of course, the serpent is associated with evil and temptation, specifically its symbolic value in the Garden of Eden. The destruction of the cross on top of mount Royal and the underground metro station meat market reminiscent of Hell all indicate religious undertones. We remark as well that Gisèle's first transformation into a snake occurs in the water of her bath and, therefore, can be seen as a sort of baptism or rebirth where Gisèle adopts not only the form but the manner of the serpent and all it represents. There is a reversal, however, of the idea behind Christian baptism as Gisèle's initiation into Toutou's company of demons entails a devotion to disruption and disharmony and, thus, parallels the opposing force to Christianity evident in the other religious symbolism alluded to in the text.

We have grouped together several aspects of the Gisèle character which unblock Rabouin's creativity: seduction, confinement and enchantment manifested in religious associations. All of these elements seem to point to a loss of control, an effect most evident when the doctor meets for the first time la Farine, the human manifestation of Toutou. Their strange encounter on mount Royal ends up with the two sharing a tandem

bicycle. The very fact that Rabouin occupies the rear seat suggests that he does not control the direction nor carry out his inner wishes.

As well, this episode marks the start of a noticeable change in the tone of the novel, a shift in the direction of movement, so to speak. Toutou has become an active character in the form of la Farine and Gisèle begins to exert a total control over Rabouin. As she represents the doctor's creative force, her domination is an indication that Grégoire begins to obey his creative impulses. Most importantly, we note that exterior control is surrendered and, thus, Rabouin's narration is forced to focus on a description of his inner feelings and thoughts as that is all that remains under his control. Loss of control, therefore, is the way by which he enters into the imaginary universe inside of him. This is illustrated in the following passage where Grégoire and la Farine are on the tandem bicycle:

J'étais...comment dire? En un mot, je me retrouvais inexplicablement privé de volonté et plutôt que de détailler à toutes jambes comme je l'aurais voulu, je restais bien calmement assis sur ma selle. *Bien calmement*, mais en apparence seulement: au dedans, je tremblais, j'avais peur comme j'imagine qu'on a peur devant un phénomène d'origine surnaturelle, hors de portée de l'esprit humain.<sup>10</sup>

The key idea in this quote is perhaps the reference to a strong inner fear. Often the doctor is described as being forced on the outside to voice meaningless phrases like *charmante soirée* and, on the inside, wanting to protest vehemently against the activities in which he is being forced to participate. Beginning an involuntary bicycle trip, therefore, is an image which symbolizes a narrative journey, an interior exploration of himself through the writing of the text. Furthermore, it is

another example of erratic spatial movement. Like his continual transport via Gisèle's gift of ubiquity, it is a physical displacement which, in its magical and imaginative description, permits the doctor to escape the confines of his noncreative lifestyle.

We have mentioned that spatial displacement is central in this novel. It takes on many forms throughout the text. For example, inversion and disorder are fundamental in Gisèle's life with Toutou and are quite prevalent in her effect on Rabouin. We can see by the way in which she dismantles the communist group at the CBC that she is a character with the ability and the desire to foster confusion and panic. Although she tells them in her serpentine form that she wishes to help them "...à remettre de l'ordre dans le monde", she achieves the opposite, causing an hysterical uproar and disbanding the group.<sup>11</sup>

It is interesting to note, therefore, that her disruption of Rabouin's life is an attack primarily on his conservative lifestyle and especially on his professional life as a doctor. For example, the initial disturbance, his trip to Moscow with Gisèle via her gift of ubiquity, results in him missing a day of work. Instead of being in his office, the doctor is in Gisèle's bed. Can we not perceive in the nature of this disruption a meaning? Perhaps Rabouin is rejecting the rational world of medicine in favour of a secret passion. His presence in the bed of the sensual and attractive Gisèle rather than in the sterile environment of his medical office seems to indicate a need to escape and a search for sensuality that can only be expressed in a creative pursuit. It is his professional life, therefore, which

covers up and blocks his creativity and, again, Gisèle's magical character which provides the escape.

As in his trip to Moscow, Grégoire's professional life is the target of disorder during Gisèle and la Farine's invasion of his office and, subsequently, the convention of physicians at the Hotel Reine Elizabeth. Often referred to as demons, we observe that the disruption which they cause in the doctor's office and in the city of Montreal are not just random acts of evil. They tend to follow the same pattern of inversion and contribute to turning Rabouin's mundane world upside down.

Most obvious is the deformation of the language. Proper names such as *Rabouin* or *Ribeault* are transformed into amusing variations such as *Babouin* or *Ribote*<sup>12</sup> and la Farine's chosen name, *Barbin*, is completely inverted becoming *Binbar*, *Branib* or *Narbbi*.<sup>13</sup> Apart from the invention of nonsensical medical terms such as *Bursitanachérite aiguë*, we see that even basic words of the medical profession such as *médecin(e)* become distorted into *médezin(e)*.

However, it is not just language which becomes distorted. In seemingly impossible operations, Rabouin's patients become mutilated and, again, we note the inversion or reversal theme; this time directly effecting the doctor's practice. Organs are transposed or transplanted by other objects. In its most literal sense the inversion is obvious with the mutilation of his patient named Brazeault whose legs and arms are reversed so that he walks "...la tête en bas et le sexe en haut".<sup>14</sup>

The inversion of names and medical jargon, the mutilation of his patients, in short, the complete reversal of his professional

world is the strongest expression yet of his desire to reject the ordered conditions of his career and to find a form of expression which is entirely opposite to his current lifestyle.

Turning to other episodes in the text, we observe the perverted sexuality evident at an outward level in the *récréation de nuit*. Here, in an underground metro station, deformed clients with deviant tastes select mental patients for sexual purposes:

Chaque client avait ses goûts et ses exigences, certains, plus fortunés, emmenant jusqu'à trois malades. Ainsi, une blonde oxygénée, minuscule, dans les cinquante-cinq ans, enleva ses bagues et fourra son doigt pointu dans pas moins d'une quinzaine de rectums avant de se décider de partir avec deux hommes et une femme. Autre cas remarquable, celui d'un gros homme flasque, placide, un sourire béat sur les lèvres, qui exigea le plus gros clitoris et arrêta finalement son choix, après de minutieux examens, sur une femme grasse et blonde.<sup>15</sup>

Sexual excess and perversion in this passage are indications of a magic power. They show Rabouin's ability to formulate a fantasy scenario of incredible imagination. Indeed, the doctor refers to that creative force when he states that "Seul un écrivain professionnel..." could describe the spectacle before him.<sup>16</sup>

The abnormality of the appearance and deviant sexual tastes of the clients who visit their meat market known as *à la Bonne Chair* illustrate the degree to which his power extends. It is important to note that in this scene la Farine plays the role of a psychiatrist. His adopted profession reinforces the notion that Rabouin is fighting against the inhibiting effects of his profession. By setting up a scenario portraying a doctor/patient relationship counter to one which you would expect in his professional life, Grégoire has again targeted his occupation in his creative expression. We note elements in this quote that seem to parody his profession. For example, several gestures,

specifically the insertion of a pointed finger in *une quinzaine de rectums* or the choice of the woman with the largest clitoris *après de minutieux examens*, mimic medical procedures and, therefore, constitute a mockery of the doctor's professional life.

The scenes of butchery which occur in his office are also powerful descriptive passages entailing magical operations. For example, la Farine's cure for the venereal disease of two of his patients is to transpose their sex organs with other parts of their body. Again if we interpret this scene in terms of the doctor's stifled creativity, we note the strongest suggestion yet of a creative spirit repressed by his profession. Indeed, the fact that the mutilating attack on the sex organ of his patients occurs in his office under the guise of a medical operation is a direct condemnation of his occupation as a force which deforms creativity.

We have remarked the creative effect of Toutou in Gisèle's life through the elimination of her unimaginative husband and infertile marriage and, as well, the pregnancy imagery of the snake inside her womb. The serpent Tournoukriel's association with Rabouin's sex organ, therefore, furthers the confusion of the two characters and reaffirms his creative drive:

Le souffle coupé, je portais de nouveau mon regard sur lui, et je vis alors dans ses moindres détails ce que mes yeux et ma raison s'étaient jusque-là refusés à croire: il n'était plus rose, mais vert, c'était en fait la Farine-serpent que j'avais entre les jambes! (...)

Doué d'une vie propre, il semblait percevoir même à distance les moindres désirs de cette femme et, que je le veuille ou pas, il me fallait obéir.<sup>17</sup>

It is through the intervention of Toutou as his sexual organ that Rabouin reaches his highest level of creativity. Being that

Gisèle represents the figure of his creative impulse, her full control over his actions and continued disruption of his professional life is a climactic expression of his complete obedience to his creative desire. Moreover, the opposition of this episode to the mutilation scene in the doctor's office stresses the idea that his creativity conflicts with his practical profession. For example, in the mutilation of his patients' sex organs there is a reduction in their anatomy which is in opposition to the hypertrophic transformation of his penis into a larger than life serpentine penis.

Grégoire has an obligation to write dictated by la Farine in the second installment of the *cahier noir*:

Je ne serai pas toujours parmi vous --- comme disait l'autre ---, et quelqu'un doit porter témoignage sur notre passage, à moi et Glougoutte. Ce quelqu'un sera le nommé Babouin. Il faut donc qu'il nous voie de visu à l'oeuvre et soit témoin d'un certain nombre de nos bienfaits."<sup>18</sup>

This quote reconfirms that the magical influences of the demon figures Glougoutte and la Farine/Toutou as well as Gisèle are behind the creative production of the text. The fact that Rabouin must bear witness to their disruption of his monotonous life and, in doing so, create a novel equates their supernatural influence to the act of creation. Moreover, religious significance and magic are once again linked in this passage by the allusion to Christ, *l'autre* as la Farine calls him, and the act of bearing testimony to the latter's *bienfaits*. As in the previous religious allusions, there is a reversal of Christian doctrine implied by the contrary meaning of *bienfait*.

We have noted the confusion of Gisèle and Grégoire in several episodes and at several levels of the narration.

Therefore, it is interesting to note that, in the second installment of the *cahier noir*, there is a further confusion of the two characters in that Rabouin's sexual attraction to Gisèle is reciprocated by her:

Même un être trempé comme je l'étais maintenant a ses faiblesses, et j'en eus une, qu'on ne me demande pas pourquoi, pour ce petit bourgeois élégant. Dès cette nuit-là, toutefois, je me vengeai admirablement de l'attrait qu'il exerce sur moi, le gueux! en lui en faisant voir de toutes les couleurs. Et puis, il en sait quelque chose, ça ne s'est pas arrêté là, et ce n'est pas encore fini: tant que ce salaud me tiendra entre ses griffes, tant qu'il ne m'aura pas débarrassée du sortilège qui m'attire vers lui, il le paiera cher. Ecoeurant, salaud de Rabouin! Dégoûtant personnage! Je te haïs, t'entends? Je demanderai à Toutou de te changer à ton tour en crapaud si tu ne me lâches pas. Je voudrais te voir réduit en bouillie. Salaud!<sup>19</sup>

There is in this quote allusions to many of the points we have already noted. For example, Gisèle refers to the bourgeois status of the doctor, a factor which conforms to his professional and noncreative lifestyle. As well, Gisèle's disruption of Rabouin's life which we have described as an unblocking of his creativity is referred to here as making him "voir de toutes les couleurs". The concepts of perception and colour, therefore, emphasize that creativity. Finally, the supernatural effect of the *sortilège* that she attributes to Rabouin or the fairy-tale transformation entailed by a metamorphosis into a toad both suggest the magical power which permits Grégoire to escape the bourgeois sterility of his profession and to express his creative urges in writing.

With the marriage of Rabouin and Gisèle, however, the phantasm Gisèle who was once difficult to describe in terms of reality, now becomes the most banal of bourgeois housewives and Toutou is himself displaced by Grégoire's normal sex organ. Their



marriage brings reality back into proportion and, therefore, appears to disrupt the expression of the doctor's imagination. Marriage means a creative frustration as Gisèle's character not only loses her magical power but refuses to confirm it ever existed as we have stated at the beginning of our analysis. Through this frustration, Rabouin is forced to explore other levels of expression, specifically, his creative ambition to be a writer.

Essentially, Rabouin discovers in his narrative voyage that, like Chekhov, he can indeed write. His insecurities and doubts concerning his creative abilities are proven wrong in the creating of the novel. But is his dream of writing over or just beginning at the end of the text? The key to this problem might be found at the end of the book. For example, Grégoire's conviction that his fantasies are only a prelude to "...événements plus graves, encore à venir" implies the continuation of his creativity.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, we note a circular effect which sets the jump from the real to the unreal back in motion. The narrator's final statement that he has made sure the word *roman* appears on the book cover will naturally cause the reader to turn back to the front cover, thus restarting the interpretation in the light of new information withheld till the very end of the text.

Finally, burning the *cahier noir* is a possible reference to burning the draught of his novel after finishing the final copy and, therefore, stresses the realization of the creative desire. Indeed, the direct quotations of the notebook and the similarities between Gisèle and Grégoire seem to support the idea

that the *hallucinante confession* to which he refers is his own. The creation of the novel and, ultimately, the positive expression of his passion represents a play on reality, a fantasy expressed through his characters and a realization of a hidden dream.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Benoit, Gisèle et le serpent, (Montréal: Libre Expression, 1981), pp.251-2.

<sup>2</sup> Benoit, p.248.

<sup>3</sup> Benoit, p.19.

<sup>4</sup> Benoit, p.225.

<sup>5</sup> Benoit, pp.79-80.

<sup>6</sup> Benoit, p.32.

<sup>7</sup> Benoit, p.30.

<sup>8</sup> Benoit, p.18.

<sup>9</sup> Benoit, p.13.

<sup>10</sup> Benoit, p.114.

<sup>11</sup> Benoit, p.74.

<sup>12</sup> The corruption of these two names is particularly interesting in terms of their meaning. *Babouin*, for example, signifies baboon, a type of monkey, and *Ribote* is an orgy of overindulgence. A further parody of Rabouin's profession and a reaffirmation of Gisèle's sexuality can be inferred from these name alterations.

<sup>13</sup> Benoit, p.214.

<sup>14</sup> Benoit, p.157.

<sup>15</sup> Benoit, pp.134-5.

<sup>16</sup> Benoit, p.134.

<sup>17</sup> Benoit, pp.242-3.

<sup>18</sup> Benoit, p.208.

<sup>19</sup> Benoit, pp.199-200.

<sup>20</sup> Benoit, p.250.

## CONCLUSION

In the literary work of Jacques Benoit, we perceive three major points common to all three studied texts. Firstly, we note the unconscious world described by the nocturnal imagery in Jos Carbone's forest and the narrative fantasies of Grégoire Rabouin. Secondly, disruptive and violent change appear throughout all the texts as well as certain reoccurring symbolism. It will be our task to gather together some common elements which explain how the violent rupture is produced in each text. Finally, we note a tendency in Jacques Benoit's writing to initiate a particular literary genre only to stray later from the laws which govern it.

We have defined the forest in Jos Carbone as a dark and hidden enclave of repressed emotions. It is home to Jos and reflects the darker recesses of his unconscious mind. The most obvious aspect of this world is the shadowy, nocturnal images which forms a suitable background for the surfacing of primitive passions. Fogs and mists, the buried souterrain, the forest at night; these are all elements which recall Jos' unconscious mind. In Jos' case, the unconscious manifests itself as a jealous reaction to a perceived threat to his forest and, primarily, to Myrtie. Throughout we are reminded that things in the forest are not always as they seem. Unhealthy mists are said to confuse the mind and invaders like the lynx are often unseen or, like Pierrot, appear as ghostly white faces at the window. Therefore,

the possibility exists that this threat is only imagined in the insecure fears of Jos' unconscious mind.

In Gisèle et le serpent, the unconscious world is within the narrator Grégoire Rabouin and revolves around his creative drive. Through the rich imagination and fantasies of his written creation is made manifest his unconscious desire to create. Propelled both by a conventional Gisèle who denies the imagined events of his narration and by a fantasy Gisèle who unblocks his literary expression, Rabouin finds an outlet for unconscious passions on the printed page. Nocturnal imagery is not so evident as in Jos's forest yet we note shadowy elements such as the *trou de conscience* caused by ubiquity, the *récréation de nuit*, or even the black colour of the *cahier noir*. As well, it is not a question of suppressed primitive passions as in the first novel but rather a release of his creative drive and the expression of his literary desire. Moreover, perceptions are twisted in the fanciful happenings of the story like in the mists of Jos' forest and ghostly apparitions such as the unearthly white face of la Farine tie in well with Pierrot's spectre like image. However, the threat in the doctor's unconscious mind is not imagined and does not take on human form as we have noted with the character of Pierrot. The menace of his noncreative profession is very real and Grégoire deals with it through his phantasms.

In Les Princes, the space represented by *la Ville* is home to a wider array of conflict which exists not only in the mind of an individual as in the first two novels but in the combined mentality of a multi-race environment. Similar nocturnal and repressive imagery such as mining shafts in *la Ville*, underground

galleries in Coquin grim pant as well as the hidden passages of the *Château* enhance the somber atmosphere of the text.

In all three novels, we look to the underlying symbolism for meaning. The violent rupture in Jos Carbone is produced by the unleashing of repressed or primitive emotions from within the hero. A tormented Jos gives in to his paranoid fears of invasion and from that moment the stability can not return to the forest until the hero either represses or dispels his anxieties. As a result, the balance in the forest is destroyed and the text is set in motion. Erratic displacement and violence behaviour in the text are all signs of inner movement in the hero. Indeed, chase or flight of the invading presence indicates the emotional upheaval within Jos.

In Les Princes, violence and the rupture of stability are produced in an urban social setting. There is tension at all levels of this society which is aggravated by a variety of factors. The sterile terrain, the superiority of canine society, their precarious position on the border between animality and human law and impotency and frustration in Coquin society all contribute to the building of that tension. Unlike Jos who accuses and names his disruptive intruder, the criminal or the crime in *la Ville* is never verbalized. In the final analysis, however, it is superstition, what is said, and noncommunication, what is not said, which are the underlying motivations for the explosion of this tension. The origins of their disruption are deeply buried in the folklore and evolution of the three race settlement.

The unblocking of Rabouin's creative drive signifies the release of violent and often disturbing fantasies. Displacement, as in Jos' inner world, is certainly evident in the doctor's experience and we note that the hero is often disoriented and overwhelmed by the perturbation. Under the influence of Gisèle, disproportion, disorder and disorientation abound. In short, there is a shaking up of the hero's existence. As in the other texts, this displacement reflects an attempted resolution of an underlying conflict which, in Grégoire's case, is a personal appeal to his own creativity.

The novels we have chosen for our analysis are difficult to place in one particular literary genre. We note, however, that in all three texts, there are vestiges of a standard literary type. The deviation from the rules of these genres constitutes another form of displacement. For example, in Jos Carbone, we observe traces of the novel of discovery and exploration as it might relate to a territorial quest. Jos' quest to protect the forest certainly establishes this idea from the start of the novel. Moreover, the landscape descriptions of swamp and forest as well as the evident search and discovery of the invader Pierrot continue to develop the genre. However, whereas discovery and exploration imply a large scale quest, Jos' adventures relate to an inner discovery of the mind not an outer exploration of terrain. We have noted that the unnamed forest functions as a metaphor for the unconscious. In effect, the novel is the hero's own self-exploration leading to the revelation of the deeper self with all its related insecurities and fears.

Introduced in a utopian style, one soon notices that *la Ville*, its inhabitants and their social order resemble more a jungle than a utopia. Jacques Pelletier notes that, "...contrairement à la cité utopique qui est toujours à la fois critique de la société actuelle et modèle de ce qu'elle devrait être, la cité présentée par Benoit apparaît amputée de cette fonction révolutionnaire".<sup>1</sup> Although isolated in time and space in that the date is not fixed nor the location specified, *la Ville* lacks the quest for purity and the tolerance inherent in the utopian genre. In effect, it can be considered an anti-utopia in that its buried galleries and mines, filthy streets and violent social clashes suggest the destruction of order. Moreover, the utopia represents perfection and stability in social development. In Les Princes, we note only a world in decline. Any vestige of a utopian order as indicated at the opening of the novel soon falls away into violent and apocalyptic destruction.

Finally, in Gisèle et le serpent, the magical fairy tale is displaced by brutal realism and attention to detail. The universal time and place which we have noted in the other two novels does not exist in Benoit's latest work. The narrator dates the action during the 1980s and states explicitly the location as Montreal. The fairy-tale genre, however, relies on a undetermined locality and time. Being that street and place names all fit a system of identifiable location within the realm of the reader's knowledge, a discord is struck between the world of magic and the world of reality which makes their convergence all the more tumultuous. As well, similarities exist insofar as the fantasy nature of the intrigue. Startling transformations and magical



beings all belong to this style. Also present in the text is the implied necessity that the reader accept, for the purposes of the narration, that these fantastic stories are possible. Certainly, without this consent, Rabouin's story slips again into disturbing realism.

All three texts, therefore, function in their choice of genre more by displacement than by any obedience to a set literary rule or principal. Though we state here in our conclusion only a global and general interpretation of the material, we believe our commentary on the literary genre to be consistent with our observations of Benoit's work on the whole and constitutes a further example of the violent and disruptive characteristics inherent in the imaginary universe we have endeavoured to describe.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Pelletier, "Les Princes," Livres et auteurs québécois, 1973, p.32.

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