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Gilbert La Rocque: Vampire of Words

In late 1984, Quebec literature lost one of its finest contemporary writers. It is particularly regrettable that, during his brief lifetime, Gilbert La Rocque was not able to achieve the personal success his pen so justly deserved. He was evidently only too aware himself of the grave discrepancy between his novels' true worth and the widespread apathy and contempt which they encountered. In his last prose fiction, *Le Passager*, Bernard Pion, a young writer harboring dreams of composing the great Quebec novel, becomes embroiled in an obsessive controversy with the widely esteemed literary critic, Marcel Guilbert. According to the critic, Bernard is nothing but a vile brute whose books are so unsavory that no one would wish to read them.¹ Feeling victimized by Guilbert's skill as a literary grave digger, the infuriated Bernard, after a further clash with the critic, entertains fantasies of homicide. What can we make of all this spleen and hyperbole in *Le Passager*? Is it merely a case of Gilbert La Rocque deploying his caustic wit in a virulent satire of the Montreal literary establishment? Actually, it is much more, for it reflects quite directly the author's own entanglements with critics. Moreover, it betrays his deep personal frustrations in his efforts to establish himself as a writer.

Only an exceptionally sensitive author could have projected onto the written page such intense reactions to the various incidents making up his characters' fictional lives. Few writers have examined so extensively the dimensions of human anguish or portrayed so forcefully the horrors of human experience. Though not as piquant, his portrayals of the East Montreal working class rival those found in Michel Tremblay's work. It appears as well that the literary processes he used develop certain paths traced in Hubert Aquin's fiction.

A full-page tribute to La Rocque published in Montreal's *Le Devoir* a week after his sudden death, encapsulating the opinions of many of

Quebec's outstanding men and women of letters (including Gérard Bessette, Gilles Archambault, Alice Parizeau, Yves Beauchemin, Jacques Poulin and others) bears witness to the respect in which his writing was held by the francophone intellectual élite.² The questions posed by La Rocque in his works are the truly great ones. Perhaps in a more incisive way than any other contemporary Quebec author, he explored the depths of human consciousness. Yet, it must be said that his works did not sell and they have not reached a wide reading public.

The limited success of La Rocque's fiction may be attributed to his whole approach towards literature. This approach can only be understood through some knowledge of the author's personal world. An inordinate experience of suffering, poverty and ugliness during his early years evidently made it impossible for him to accept any elevated or romantic vision of life. His death from a brain tumor at the age of forty-two was an event he appears to have long foreseen.³ Jérôme, the main character of his first novel, *Le nombril* (1970), suffers from tightness in his throat and is plagued with cephalic pressures and throbbing headaches (N 47). Alain, narrator of *Les Masques* (1980), has similar discomfort. Many other parallels between himself and his characters may be found throughout his works: outsider figures thoroughly at loggerheads with their social milieu, often fraught with a strong sense of disgust and loathing and harassed and oppressed by the physical environment as well as by others. While these characters come at times to the fringe of madness, Bernard Pion, in *Le Passager*, actually does go mad. The fact that each is so adept at discerning and fixing upon the more gruesome and vicious aspects of life reveals a terrible lucidity bordering clearly on the pathological (N 93).

Masks and Reality

Commenting on his own works, La Rocque observed that the writing of a novel can never be a perfect transposition of reality, a pretence inherited from the nineteenth century realists. Quite the contrary, through the conjoined play of memory and fantasy, and given a certain distance in time, a creative writer distorts and magnifies the happenings of a lifetime. This necessarily occurs with any recollections of the past.⁴ However, as the author tells us through Alain, the writer-protagonist of the novel, *Les Masques*, there exists a further form of memory, a writer's "false memory," that is to say, the blend of remembrances and imagination he uses in the fabrication of his works. Reflecting upon the creative process, Alain asserts: "Il vient toujours

un point où il est bien difficile de démêler les identités, la vraie et la fabriquée, l'écrite et la vécue, masque et face, costume et peau" (M 21). As the title of the book at least in part implies, it is the very nature and purpose of any work of art to "unmask" reality, that is to say, to see behind appearances, for life's experience is largely masked (EO 309). These comments lead to the revelation of La Rocque's own basic intentions as a writer: to refuse categorically any form of the lie, particularly as it has been expressed traditionally in the Quebec novel. This means discovering, as a Québécois writer, an authentic means of expression.

These comments explain, at least in part, how the author found it so difficult to escape from an autobiographical context. As with Aquin, writing a novel was to be a highly subjective operation. This aspect of La Rocque's whole approach to creative writing may be attributed more precisely to a basic trait of his own personality: each of his protagonists betrays a very strong narcissistic tendency.⁵

It is important to consider the extreme poverty and the sordid conditions of the author's early youth. Raised in a working-class ghetto in East Montreal, his family sustained by the pittance his father received as a tinsmith with the Angus Shops, La Rocque acquired an especially sombre impression of people and the world. This fact gives us some further inkling as to why his works reveal a man who was supremely conscious of the various "masks" assumed by members of his social milieu: the feelings stifled for convention's sake, the crude passion cloaked behind a smile, all the pretence of dress and style as well as the make-up covering ugliness and decay (N 50). Besides this, there were those forms of the mask a writer must essentially struggle against: the apathy, facile happiness and neglect of those who avoid self-questioning.

La Rocque's search for authenticity closely recalls the idiom of the great French innovator, Louis-Ferdinand Céline—there is a similar insistence on obscenity, the depiction of numerous coarse and shoddy types as well as a dour compassion for victims and the down-trodden.⁶ At the same time, it could be said that there is something of Sade and Lautréamont in his efforts to reveal the beast within. However, while a novel such as *Le nombril* is clearly marked by these sources of influence, the author's approach to fiction was more directly stirred by currents of thought much closer to home. In his early novels, for instance, he appeared to have much in common with the young writers who initiated the review, *Parti pris*, a Montreal group in violent revolt against what was deemed to be a false image of Quebec life as por-

trayed in the literature of the past. Nevertheless, he may also be seen, from the outset, to be a sworn enemy of the "misérabilisme"⁷ that characterizes such *Parti pris* novelists as Jacques Renaud or André Major.

The thrust of La Rocque's prose is certainly quite different from the socio-political bent which was another distinguishing trait of the *Parti pris* group. La Rocque's interests were mainly metaphysical and psychological. For him, if the fundamental goal of art was to expose those brutal truths concealed in a world of appearances, one of the hallmarks of his writing is the intensity of virtually every scene in his work. It could be said that each of his novels is composed of a series of crises large and small. In addition, the narrator of the events concerned quite frequently relates his reactions as though in a state of frenzy or paroxysm. As for the narrative itself, the stream of consciousness technique, the conversational tone, brisk rhythms, exclamations and numerous epithets create a sense of intimate drama in even the most incidental passages.

In *Le nombril*, where the events occur over some thirty-six hours, the tormented experiences of the young protagonist come through to us in particular fury, his emptiness and despair expressing themselves in masochistic delight as he dangles a dead rat before his own mouth (N 12). The main characters of each novel appear to overreact to their experience. At moments, the intense pursuit of the real leads the author and his personages into a paradoxical fusion with the world of fantasy. This fundamental tendency found throughout La Rocque's works is perhaps best exemplified in Gabrielle's monologue in *Après la boue*. Here a young woman's endless reinventions in the telling of her own life story come to a point where the frontier between reality and fiction appears to fade (AB 175). The whole problem of fictional "lying" is treated most directly in *Le Passager*. In this novel's short epilogue, where the subjective narrative switches most surprisingly to an omniscient author's point of view, Bernard Pion's long exposé of the cruel episodes that make up much of his past is shown to have been little more than dream-world ravings and hallucinations. Thus, while the author demonstrates in his work how consciousness may waver between reality and fantasy, it may also be inferred here (much as it is suggested in his other works) that man's ultimate reality may be found on the level of phantasmal experience. As the narrator comments in *Serge d'entre les morts*: "toute rêve domine toute réalité" (SM 143).

The Aesthetics of Repulsion

La Rocque's characters were drawn from a fund of experience that memory rendered almost mythical. Indeed, it could be said that certain recurrent phantasms or episodes make up a sort of fundamental mythology. There are, for example, accounts of horrendous nightmares as well as childhood beatings at the hands of a brutal father. Nor can we ignore the tragic drowning of a childhood sweetheart, Isabelle, first described in *Le nombril* and later transformed into the death of Eric in *Les Masques*. It is a theme that forms a sort of basic myth closely related in these novels to repeated incidents of thwarted love.⁸ While their biographical accuracy cannot be verified, these "myths" certainly corroborate Yves Beauchemin's assertion that Gilbert La Rocque harbored some very sombre experiences from his youth.

It appears that these experiences lie at the root of a general view of the world. Indeed, La Rocque's point of contention is basically a metaphysical one; any idea of a rational well-ordered universe is thoroughly inconceivable to him. Like the *Parti pris* group, he could in no way accept a patently humanistic view of the world. Literary notions of man and his greatness and beauty were to him not only unreal but thoroughly offensive. He saw a writer's true task as to attack naïve perceptions of reality and to rectify those false and hypocritical representations of humanity and society so common in fiction. In this way, literature was to be demystified and freed from its idealized role.

The observations made thus far provide a fairly general explanation of the extremely aggressive stance La Rocque assumed, whether in the elaboration of his texts, in his defiance of the critics or in his attitude towards the reading public at large. It is important to see that, in his efforts to shake commonplace and stereotyped views of the world and to challenge the standard criteria used in the interpretation of prose fiction, he developed certain highly contentious techniques; his whole mode of writing is founded upon what has been deemed the "aesthetics of repulsion."⁹ Putting aside questions of temperament, this insistence upon the repugnant aspects of life was also derived from profound intellectual convictions. If the goal of art is to unmask the real, then this means telling the whole truth about human experience; in other words, nothing of what is human is to be denied.

Further light is shed on La Rocque's stance through a brief analysis of the link between his ideas and existentialist thought. The repeated nausea felt by a Jérôme, a Serge or a Bernard stems not only from

fearful perceptions or strained relations with others, its causes are deeply metaphysical. Each novel retraces a struggle between being and nothingness, since life is a slow process of decomposition. In the case of each protagonist, his or her efforts towards self-awareness are accompanied by moments of great anguish concerning the horrors of human existence. To live is to be constantly violated by the presence of others (N 146). Along with this notion, the recurrent themes of liberty and responsibility have a strong Sartrean resonance. For La Rocque as for Sartre, the human condition, fraught with the inevitability of suffering and death, is irrational and absurd. The innately existentialist qualities of his work may be further illustrated by the fact they are composed in such a way as to insist upon his characters as predominantly sentient beings. Every means is used to produce an imposing sense of physical existence. The whole verbal deployment of a Larocquian text is keyed, therefore, towards evoking in the reader's reactions to his characterizations what in psychology is termed "coenesthesia,"¹⁰ that is to say, a sense of their functional being through general sensations and bodily impressions.¹¹

While a sense of physical reality is frequently heightened by references to related phenomena—foetuses, mucus, blood, viscera and so forth—this overall impression is continually underscored by a wealth of sensorial detail with a particular stress upon olfactory experiences in all their pungent crudity. The emphasis in numerous passages is also aggressively anal and excremental. Several scenes belabor depictions of nausea and vomiting to a point where only an exceptional reader would not feel under stress. These are, indeed, potent metaphorical means for accentuating defiance, scorn and disgust. La Rocque's whole aim is to thwart his readers' normal expectations and shake complacent reactions to a written text. At the same time, as the author himself points out, much of what is repulsive to human beings stems from the unknown; a sense of repugnance grows from a state of malaise, a metaphysical fear that, with effort, can be largely overcome. In any case, many who find a text particularly challenging to the mind or sensibility merely abandon it. Truly good readers, those who know how to interpret a book, to search behind the story line for a wealth of hidden or discrete meaning, are a very rare breed and this applies to critics as well (EO 307).

La Rocque's intentions, then, indeed, his whole approach to the novel, went far beyond flaunting repugnant crudities before an unschooled and undiscerning reading public. As has been suggested, one of his principal aims was to deride and repudiate the critics and the

literary establishment they served. His entire experience as a writer is depicted in *Le Passager*. Here we see that, in Quebec, no sooner does an author assert himself and attempt to establish a new mode that is not merely facile and entertaining than he runs afoul of critical opinion.

Trauma

La Rocque's own texts are certainly far from facile. The true subject of his novels is human suffering and how various individuals come to terms with it. It is because of their acute experience of moral suffering that his protagonists' behavior often borders on the pathological. In precise terms, what fascinated the author above all else were those lesions of the soul, the traumata that affect human beings most deeply throughout their lives. In *Corridors* (1971), a novel rife with sentimental and psychological overtones, La Rocque, more overtly than in his other writings, exposed those elements that would serve as the basic formula for his subsequent works' psychological infrastructure. Through the reflections of the novel's young hero, Clément, the author expresses his belief that, although any individual searches for freedom, he is in reality enslaved not only by his senses but also by past experience from which he can never succeed in detaching himself. As Clément expresses it, "C'est toujours son passé qui se souvient de lui" (C 145). A person can merely attempt to liquidate painful recollections, that is to say "ses hantises et ses hontes et ses chutes et les spectres lancinants de l'enfance," either by turning away from them, or better still, by facing them, assimilating them and consuming them once and for all. While understanding that one's past is in itself really quite dead and that all that remains later is "la conscience vertigineuse d'être soi-même," one may move forward in a sort of headlong flight through the corridors of time, not totally divested of the past, but somehow sustained by what remains of it so that it is possible to continue to assume one's identity and one's destiny.¹²

Les Masques

In the light of this general commentary on the author's background, his ideas and his approach towards the art of writing, I will now undertake a close examination of his most impressive novel, *Les Masques*.

The novel opens with an interview between a superficial lady journalist and the narrator-writer, Alain. When, oblivious to the value of

nuances and ambiguities in a work of art, she seeks only ready-made answers to patent questions, it is a sign that what follows in *Les Masques* will serve as a vigorous response to such critics. And so, along with the telling of Alain's story, much of La Rocque's purpose in this work is to elucidate the nature of artistic creation itself.¹³ More extensively than in his other novels, he explores a universe of mental images in an attempt to unmask the stirrings of his narrator's (and his own) subconscious. As these images also serve to illustrate the universal aspects of the creative act, this novel occupies a central position in his work.

Les Masques demonstrates a good deal of technical progress over his earlier fiction. In an effort to avoid the language of written speech and to imitate the movements of the psyche, the author uses a dynamic stream-of-consciousness style. In a text developed with a good deal of linguistic virtuosity and dialogue, La Rocque introduces as his chief structural modification a novel within the novel. Several passages contain the excerpts of a novel Alain is in the process of writing.

From these excerpts as well as from Alain's own "cinéma intérieur," we learn that, some years before, he had taken his son, Eric, to his grandpa Tobie's home situated next the Rivière des Prairies in North Montreal for the old man's ninety-first birthday. At their family gathering, Alain discovers his eight-year-old son playing with matches in the garden. In a sudden reaction, he strikes the boy and allows him to run off alone (M 150). Eric, evidently upset with his father, sets out on the river in a decrepit rowboat. After hours of searching, the police are called, the river is dragged and eventually, Eric's body is retrieved from the water covered in filth. For Alain, it all seems absurd and grotesque, while he is crushed by the most atrocious suffering, for, indeed, what has happened must be counted among "les plus insupportables déchirements du coeur" (M 96).

To understand what may be the consequences of this tragedy and how the narrator is able to come to terms with his guilt and despair, we must follow him back into the deepest recesses of his past. In *Les Masques*, Alain is often at the wheel of his car (M 180). His life is thus portrayed as a symbolic voyage. However, his sense of steering towards a destination is largely an illusion, for most of his travels are made within the labyrinth of memory.

Alain remembers, when in bed at the age of five, having seen the nightmarish apparition of a woman with a red mouth standing howling in a corridor. It was his mother. Soon after, despairingly incapable of bestowing any further affection on her children, she dies suffering

atrociously from cancer (M 63). While the other children are then dispersed among relatives, the father, drinking heavily, soon introduces into their abode his vulgar mistress, Gertrude, and Alain is on occasion the unhappy witness to their love-making. Alain is repulsed by this woman who, with her leering heavy mouth, in no way resembles his mother. However, when the father is away, the boy is fully exposed to her baseness, for she approaches him, housecoat open, attempting to press his face to her gaping sex. Alain flees retching in disgust. In a later episode, the boy's own male instincts are stirred and his father, arriving on the scene, beats him in fury. Alain is tempted to murder Gertrude for the depravity she has inflicted upon him, but he is really incapable of such an act (M 71). His father, at last, takes him to stay at his aunt Estelle's country home at St. Eustache, but he escapes to wander the roads, an abandoned and mortally homesick child (M 71).

Alain does find a second home by the Rivière des Prairies with grandpa Tobie and grandma Vieille. Here he has further odious impressions of womankind, for an elderly aunt Philomène still lives with them. A prey to broken dreams, she relieves her torment with brandy and solitary sex. As he grows, Alain's own adolescent sexual experiences are haunted by fears of sin as well as memories of Gertrude. Escaping from these dull surroundings, where old Tobie is eternally parked in front of his TV, the young man seeks to live and to come to terms with his private hell.

He falls in love with a young woman, Anne, and they have a child, Eric. However, Anne, thrown back upon herself since giving up her employment, sinks into mental illness. Again, Alain must suffer the pangs of separation. He experiences then "ce malheur ultime de n'être pas capable de cesser d'aimer alors que l'amour même est un mal qui vous tue . . ." (M 92). Savage sex bouts with a lady friend, Louise, never succeed in erasing his love for Anne. When the unthinkable occurs and Eric is drowned, Anne goes completely mad and Alain is doubly grieved. It is then he comes to realize that, just as some thirty years before, he had stood on a dark road in St. Eustache abandoned by his father, he is once again "abandonné et atrocement seul dans la nuit hostile" (M 189). Life has come full circle like the Ouroboros biting its tail.¹⁴

Long years after this initial event, Alain is tempted to put an end to his days. However, several factors stay his hand. First of all, he is able to relate in his mind those two supreme moments of suffering. It is therefore with a certain perspective on the world that he realizes that the cycle of life goes on despite such grief. Since he had survived the

first situation, he might just as well outlive the second. The beauty of summer might once again shine through.

From another point of view, Eric may be looked upon as his father's double. By dying in the river, he has already, in a sense, committed the suicide his father contemplates. Rather than die physically himself, Alain feels he must accept a more terrible end, that of living on in a state of lucid despair. For some time he falls into a period he best defines himself as a sort of "emptiness," but in the end he slowly rises from it as though purified and able once again to hold his head high (M 112). This, then, is the writer, Alain, we meet in the novel's first pages. While he writes of his past, he refuses to speak of his daughter, Myriam, or his new lady companion who represent, as he tells us, his last chance for love and happiness (M 48).

So far we have discussed the narrator's tragic experience, now we must turn to the novel's rich symbolic texture. First of all, we must consider the river, for the entire novel is constructed around this image. The river (one of Céline's favorite images) is a very ancient symbol standing, on the one hand, for the flux of life's forms and, on the other, for fertility, death and renewal; it represents both creation and destruction. While this characterizes the river in *Les Masques*, we, the readers, discover as well that Alain is himself creating a book which is to be a river, a sort of "roman-fleuve." It will be the stream of life transformed into memories, some of which are so clouded and muddy that at times they may appear to resemble an obscene diarrhea (M 82). Indeed, within the novel itself may be found the same qualities as those of the river, the same meandering movement, the same flow, decay, sludge and sediment.

The great willow on Tobie's lot rises from the river's silt (M 141). While the river is a symbol of Nature itself, repeatedly in La Rocque's novels, a tree, standing close to the paternal (or avuncular) home, represents virility as well as man's dreams and aspirations. In *Le nombril*, when young Jérôme spends a weekend with his uncle at St. Siméon, it is his only experience of an earthly paradise. In *Corridors*, the boy, Clément, runs free as a rabbit in the hills and fresh air of the Bas-du-fleuve. Part of the tragedy of these heroes is that they live alienated from the natural world. It is in the stifling urban milieu that they discover boredom, corruption and despair. At the same time, as we have seen, Nature's role is ambiguous.

In *Les Masques*, Alain is warned when quite young to stay away from the waters which are known to devour young children, a foreboding substantiated a generation later with his son's drowning. On this

point, we come to the chief metaphysical imagery the author attaches to the river, for, as we are told, this pernicious goddess does not always yield up her corpses. In the exact spot where the child sinks in the miasmatic waters boils the teaming manure, source of fermentation and new growth. Thus, the decomposition taking place in the river's depths represents "le recommencement, le cycle de la vie et de la mort en passant par le pourrissement (M 79). Parallel with this reality, we are to see that, while his body is redeemed from the water, Eric's death has engendered a coming to consciousness on his father's part. Through this death, Alain has achieved a certain integration of the Self and the possibility of living more fully.

At several points in *Les Masques*, Alain's imaginings are tormented by an irrepressible "torrent d'images" (M 113). Indeed, La Rocque's novel is itself filled with an outpouring of images, images in the sense of phantasms and perceptions, but also in terms of a pattern of symbols interwoven within the novel's thematic framework. He wanted to create a form of expression suited to his vision of the universe, not as static and ordered, but fluid, chaotic and multi-faceted. Consequently, his resounding "Brucknerian"¹⁵ phrases are marked by a medley of images, often ambiguous in meaning, much as in the baroque style of Hubert Aquin.¹⁶

Within this pattern of images, the river and the sun appear to have a complementary significance. While, on the one hand, the sun represents a source of light, warmth and life, in the opening passage of *Les Masques*, it also beats down upon the city, scorching, liquifying and consuming cars, pavement, people and the narrator himself, much as the river is shown to stir life as well as to swallow, dissolve and debase.

As a context for many of La Rocque's prose descriptions, we find, then, two consummate settings from the phenomenal world for which the river and the sun serve as key images: the one characterized by such details as water, rain, liquid, oozing, flowing, etc., and the other by its converse, that is to say brilliance, heat, burning and so forth. While this continually recurring symbolism stresses nature's flux and man's precariousness, these texts are, at the same time, sharply divided in their imagery between innumerable references to sunshine, light, clarity, whiteness, etc., as opposed to night, darkness, shade and the tone of black. It is a pattern denoting quite clearly the forces of memory, awareness and life, on the one hand, and those of obscurity, nothingness and death on the other. The prevalent use of chiaroscuro underscores the novel's ominous atmosphere. Allusions to spiders and other insects as well as rats, serpents, dogs and a variety of weird animals

accentuate the work's nightmarish tone. Novels such as *Les Masques* and *Serge d'entre les morts*, with their emphasis on evil, psychological terror and the grotesque, are principally gothic in design.¹⁷

I have mentioned that the author was able to imbue his texts with a tremendous sense of physicality. A close reading of Alain's narration reveals that, while the body itself and its functions are central to La Rocque's design, his sensual imagery is accompanied by six other capital signs—the eyes, head, mouth, face, hands and heart—which serve as devices denoting the various facets of human conduct at large.¹⁸ The hand, for example, is often a symbol of sexuality and physical domination. The eyes indicate perception and awareness, while the mouth, the organ of speech and communication, is closely related to the narrative itself. It is important to note as well the inclusion in this spectrum of the male and female genitals as well as the anus. In certain phantasmal descriptions they are related to or confused with images of the heart and mouth.¹⁹ In a La Rocquian sense, the orifices of the human body are tied to the theme of artistic creation. Alain, for instance, imagines a certain passage of his novel while defecating (M 37).

The Portrayal of Woman

This imagery of the body's orifices leads us back one again to Alain's psychic torment and his childhood vision of a woman with a large red mouth. If a painful recounting of past events—his son's pathetic relations with his mother, his death by water and other remembrances—lead Alain, to greater self-awareness, it is also subtly suggested in *Les Masques* that he arrives in the end at a better adjustment to woman-kind. After the initial childhood fantasies concerning the red-mouthed figure in the night, the narrator appears to have known nothing but a lifetime of negative impressions of woman in general, his conduct towards women being habitually aggressive. Indeed, after his mother's death, no one is worthy to replace her. The loss of his mother's love and the horror of her death, followed by the revelations of Gertrude's crude mouth and sex, leave permanent scars. As well, an ageing aunt Philomène serves to cement a profound sense of loathing. Years later, an innocuous female journalist arouses simmering contempt on Alain's part. When, at another moment, his sex-maddened mistress, Louise, begs for oral gratification, his own fierce desire fails him in his anger and he drops her soon after. As for his marriage, we know little of his relations with Anne except that he loves her desperately. Essentially,

Anne plays a further negative feminine role: frail and bound to a sickly old mother, she becomes increasingly alienated and finally sinks into madness.

We need to remember the pre-eminent significance Alain attaches to the river not only as a symbol of the flux of life itself, but also as a reflection of the narrative he is composing. What it is particularly important to observe at this point, however, is the river's distinctly feminine character for, as I have mentioned, it is defined at one moment as a "déesse mangeuse" (M 167). While this suggests some interesting parallels, it also calls to mind a certain reference to the river and its bowels as well as Alain's wandering through a subterranean passage as though trapped in a dark intestine hoping to escape into the light of day (an incident quite indicative of his wish to render conscious the subconscious causes of his neurosis). This is followed quite closely by an allusion to a phantasm arising from Alain's childhood in which he imagines being sucked up and disappearing into his mother from below, just as in *Serge d'entre les morts* the hero had similar fears at the same age (M 44). In both contexts it is suggested that, to the young child's fancy, the means of this return to his mother's womb is anal rather than through the birth canal. This phantasm lends credence to Gérard Bessette's Freudian interpretation of Serge's story whereby the hero, as a child, passes through the three stages of psycho-sexual development, that is to say from the oral to the anal sadistic and thence to the phallic stage (S 219). Here we have a feasible explanation for the author's technique of enacting, in his phantasmal descriptions, a sort of poetic interchange, a confusion and substitution of roles of the various physical signs and of the orifices of the female body.

In light of all this, Serge's experiences and those of Alain are very similar. While Serge harbors a rather confused image of his grandmother and mother as a tall woman in red approaching with fearful mouth and teeth, for Alain, after the nightmarish vision of his mother (clearly representing his oral phase), this woman disappears quite rapidly from his life. What is more, he soon has a substitute mother in the form of Gertrude with her vile mouth and ghastly red vulva. Everywhere in La Rocque's works red is the color of sexual passion. Ultimately, Alain's quest is to escape the dark shadows hidden in his subconscious and recover his initial innocence, or as he avers "retrouver le passage qui donnait sur cette rue de son enfance" (M 43). In this endeavor he not only overcomes his son's death and his wife's madness, but, just like Serge before him, he also comes to resolve those complexes concerning his mother's image which haunts the text from

beginning to end. A reconciliation with womankind is clearly indicated by his relations with his daughter, Myriam (M 48).

When applied to a work expressing so much abhorrence concerning woman and sex, accusations of misogyny are scarcely surprising.²⁰ Actually, the author's depiction of women in coarse sexual roles is a further censure of a society where "le péché du cul" (M 105) is the worst of all sins. It is also true that developing a neurosis through an unconscious fear of a maternal figure is only plausible in a collectivity having known several hundred years of stringent puritanism.²¹

Socio-political Dimensions

In *Les Masques*, the river is also described as sick and in the process of dying. Its poisoned waters teeming with dead fish, its shores lined with excretions and crawling with rats and flies, it is no longer safe to swim in. The city of Montreal is portrayed in *Le nombril* as a sort of future necropolis, its streets disgorging teams of workers from grim factories and musty offices, each breathing in his few feet of putrid air filled with the stench of sweat and oil (N 69). Amidst this blasphemy of cement and steel, refineries created in the minds of overworked megalomaniacs belch their toxic filth into the still blue sky (M 111). Abandoned houses with crumbling walls as well as old tires form the refuse of a dying civilization. References to speeding automobiles and accidents underscore the violence of a society devoted to machines. In such a world, for La Rocque, the term "humanity" sounds quite pretentious.

In so far as life in French Canada itself is concerned, all of these novels contain in their very marrow a severe indictment of the social predicament of Quebec's working class. It is an indictment heavily stressed through the author's insistence upon the monstrous side of human nature. In *Les Masques*, Alain is infuriated by various encounters with human ugliness and stupidity: a prying journalist, a bumbling neighbor who delays the search for Eric and the family gathering where the carnivalesque atmosphere of this guignol's band turns into grotesque snivelling by the water's edge.

The image of the abased French Canadian family exemplified in such works as Gabrielle Roy's *Bonheur d'occasion* receives a considerably grimmer treatment under La Rocque's pen. Just as the author himself detested the mediocrity and apathy of this milieu, his young protagonists all seek to escape from their absurd families. In several novels there is an attempt to depict three generations of Québécois

including, for example, the dim immobile Tobie, patriarch of *Les Masques*. As progenitors of their race such figures represent ideally this people who live as though in the process of dying. Whether it be the emasculated and debased father figures, the fading mothers or the inadequate, violent and desperate sons, the modelling of the various characters involved has a profound sociological significance. The alienating nature of this society is beautifully satirized in a passage of *Les Masques* where we learn how Alain's sister has been spirited away and adopted by rich relatives at the time of their mother's death. She would have nothing more to do with this lowly working class family.

The fact that the child, Eric, drowns in a filthy river while his father and a doddering Tobie live on is of further significance, for it represents, figuratively speaking, the foul sewer of despair in which the older generations of Québécois were in the process of burying their children (M 178). In any case, no matter how black his vision may have been of the situation in his own home province, only in the novel, *Corridors*, does La Rocque demonstrate direct involvement in Quebec's socio-political evolution (C 16). Here, however, Clément, a young militant, realizes in the final analysis that he is incapable of coming to grips with problems which are so vast that they represent social disintegration on a worldwide scale. This recognition by the hero of *Corridors* of the complexity and universal nature of the issues and injustices that concern him largely explains the author's own subsequent response: a more determined concentration on his craft as a writer and editor.

A Pawn of the Critics

Gilbert La Rocque's revolt against the prudery and conformity of the literature of his time reminds us of the comments Anton Chekov made about the Russian novel of the 1890s:

The novel's aim is to lull the bourgeoisie by its golden dreams. . . . The bourgeoisie admires the so-called "positive" types and novels with happy endings which calm their thoughts so they can accumulate capital, maintain their innocence, behave like beasts, and be happy all at the same time.²²

This, of course, is exactly the type of literature La Rocque wishes to debunk and the very kind of people he derides. It is not surprising that, in contemporary Quebec with its large bourgeois readership, his writing does not have a wider appeal. With his "deconstructions" of standard realism, his oeuvre has much in common with American metafiction. *Corridors*, for example, starts out as a traditional revolu-

tionary novel, the revolution soon fades completely out of focus. In *Le Passager*, the author turns with greater emphasis to the idea of prose fiction as a kind of deception. This grim fantasy reflects quite closely the author's own desperate state of mind in the period prior to his death. Even though it was conceived as a sort of anti-novel announcing a prose work of major proportions, the fact that the themes of liberation and self-realization are no longer evident reflects La Rocque's deep disillusionment. As an artist and a mature man, Bernard Pion has come to the conclusion that he is a mere pawn of the critics, a pedant in the midst of a jealous élite, and, what is more, that in the voyage of life he is but a passenger deprived of any control over his personal destiny.²³

As for the author's difficulties in marketing his books, he himself observed: "Les gens ne sont plus intéressés à une littérature profonde, et qui exige la participation active du lecteur."²⁴ In building a form of hyper-realism, he apparently believed that, in his attempts to portray life in all its mystery and complexity through an intensely conveyed representation of anguish and nausea, he might achieve some sort of catharsis or psychic liberation for others as well as for himself. Indeed, in so far as the psychological fabric of his novels is concerned, Gérard Bessette has observed quite justly that, by coming to know a Serge, a Gabrielle or an Alain, a reader may, by refraction, gain a deeper insight into his or her own self and clarify difficult relationships and learn to face personal distress (S 277). Since one of La Rocque's chief aims was to sensitize his readers to a full range of human experiences, this clearly indicates the universal scope of his writing.

Yes. La Rocque does exaggerate. His vulgarity, his repetitious vocabulary and vile portrayals do become tedious, but he is often misunderstood as well as being underestimated as a writer. His works actually reflect a profound refusal of human baseness and depravity. Madeleine Ouellette-Michalska points out that, in his fiction, Western culture itself is on trial. The tremendous sensuality of his prose and insistence on the body's presence represent an effort to abolish in our society an institutionalized divorce between body and mind.²⁵ The author's excesses in this regard serve as an indictment of a deep-rooted puritan conscience that abhors sexuality and the female.

Though it be a study in despair, La Rocque's fiction is clearly far from despairing. In a novel such as *Les Masques*, suffering itself leads to deeper understanding, while memory and the written word transcend time and death. Besides this, despite the tribulations of life and the evidence that time's passing defiles the body and debases the soul,

the recurring theme of love and the deployment of an array of doubles illustrate the interdependence of humankind and demonstrate how human endeavor continues on beyond death from generation to generation.

All of these factors, then, combined with the power and originality of his style and the ingenuity of his imagery, mark the unquestionable value of Gilbert La Rocque's prose. For these reasons, it would be an immense shame were his works to become, as he feared himself, "a testimony lost in the uncultivated desert of his poisoned country."²⁶

NOTES

1. Gilbert La Rocque, *Le Passager*, 52. The works of La Rocque discussed in the present study include the six novels: *Le nombril* (1970), *Corridors* (1971), (published by Editions du Jour, Montreal); *Serge d'encre les morts* (VLB Editeur, Montreal, 1976), *Les Masques* (1980), *Après la boue* (1981), *Le Passager* (1984), (published by Québec/Amérique, Montreal). These editions will be referred to henceforth within the text by the first principal letters of each title: N, C, SM, M, AB and P respectively. La Rocque also wrote *Le Refuge* (VLB Editeur, 1979) a modification and adaptation for the stage of *Le nombril*. As for the title of this article, the writer-protagonist of *Les Masques* refers to himself as "le déplaisant," "l'anticonceur d'histoires" and "le vampire des mots" (M 141).
2. "Hommage à un grand écrivain," *Le Devoir*, samedi, 1er décembre 1984, 25.
3. "Il vient toujours un moment dans la vie, où l'on comprend qu'on va mourir un jour, . . . idée qui ne lâche pas son homme, qui se développe et se gonfle dans la tête comme une tumeur, à tout moment on se souvient qu'il faudra mourir, et alors on finit par vivre pour ne pas rater sa mort" (N 132).
4. Donald Smith, *L'Écrivain devant son oeuvre* (Québec/Amérique, Montréal, 1983), 308. This volume contains an important interview with La Rocque. References to it will be indicated henceforth by the letters EO.
5. According to psycho-analysis, this impulse arises when the psyche suffers a symbolic wound, that is to say, when the youth in question has a feeling of being unloved; requiring some form of compensation, the injured psyche later sublimates its needs in its search for recognition. See Pierre-Louis Vaillancourt, "Narcissisme et premier roman," *Journal of Canadian Fiction* 25/26, Montreal, 1979, 254-263.
6. Gilbert La Rocque had become an outstanding editor-in-chief for Québec/Amérique. Several months after his death, Jacques Fortin, who had worked with him closely, published a brochure on La Rocque entitled *Voyage au bout de la vie*, prepared by Donald Smith. This is an obvious allusion to Céline's novel, *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (1932). For La Rocque's contributions as an editor see Jean Royer, "Gilbert La Rocque, L'édition c'est une fête," *Le Devoir*, samedi 19 décembre 1981.
7. See Jean-Ethier Blais, "Des fleurs pour Minou et un nombril pour Jérôme," *Le Devoir*, samedi, 27 juin 1970, and also Ethier-Blais' article "Le Couloir de l'amour" *Le Devoir*, samedi, 12 juin 1971.
8. Donald Smith (avec la collaboration de Gilles Dorion, Réjean Robidoux et André Vanasse), *Gilbert La Rocque, l'écriture du rêve* (Québec/Amérique, Montreal, 1985). In his essay, André Vanasse shows that the Jérôme and Isabelle motif, further developed in his play, *Le Refuge*, describes an initial paradise that ends in guilt and despondency. For Vanasse, the sense of defeat that permeates all of La Rocque's novels may be related to this myth (113).

9. André Vanasse, "la femme à la bouche rouge. A propos des *Masques* de Gilbert La Rocque," *Lettres québécoises*, No. 22, Été 1981, 23. See also François Hébert, "Narcisse à la toilette," *Le Devoir*, samedi, 3 novembre, 1984, 23.
10. Gérard Bessette, *Le Semestre* (Québec/Amérique, Montréal, 1979), 80. In this work that blends together a fictional story line and literary criticism, Bessette's laudatory commentary on La Rocque's novels is of key importance. It will henceforth be referred to in this text with the first letter, S.
11. Donald Smith, *L'écriture du rêve*, 53.
12. Els Post-Pieterse, "Vers la découverte de l'identité: les trois premiers romans de Gilbert La Rocque," *Voix et Images*, Vol. III, No. 2, décembre 1977, 279-280.
13. Donald Smith, *L'écriture du rêve*, 56.
14. In La Rocque's writing there are several references to this symbolic serpent, for example: "Ouroboros, s'avalant et se recrachant au fur et à mesure qu'il se reconstituait dans l'espace secret des pages blanches" (M 37).
15. La Rocque was a fervent admirer of Bruckner and Mahler.
16. Patricia Smart, *Hubert Aquin, agent double* (Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1973, coll. "Lignes québécoise") 71. Here, the influence of Sartre's *Critique de la raison dialectique* in Aquin's work is well described.
17. The design of La Rocque's novels fits in many regards Margot Northey's descriptions of the gothic and grotesque in *The Haunted Wilderness* (U of Toronto P, 1976).
18. A textual analysis of *Les Masques* shows that the number of references to the various body parts is as follows: the eyes (74), head (69), mouth (48), face (45), hands (50) and heart (32). The other principal images appear in the following frequency: the river (48), water (47), liquid, rain, etc. (16), the sun (26), light (56), heat, fire, etc. (36), night (48), shadows, darkness, etc. (32), white (44), black (41), red (31), excrement (15), mud (11), earth (20), houses (39), children (32), animals (29), trees (18), insects (5), cars (14), masks (11), old (11) and wind (6).
19. "Je pensais aux chaleurs lubriques qui gargouillaient dans son ventre les gros besoins ruisselants qui lui descendaient jusqu'entre les cuisses l'attache juteuse et d'une certaine façon buccale au sommet de ses jambes nues comme je la voyais marcher jambes nues dans la maison et la voyais partir avec des garçons bien plus vieille qu'elle et qui sans doute . . . mettaient leurs mains sous sa jupe et sentaient battre sous leurs doigts l'étrange coeur de poil" (SM 62).
20. Madeleine Ouellette-Michalska, "Un livre qui envoûte et dérange," *Le Devoir*, 17 janvier 1981, 19.
21. Of course, if this is true of Quebec, it could also be applied to other countries of Western culture.
22. Quoted by Ernest J. Simmons, *Chekhov, a biography* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1962), 349.
23. The word "pion" in French means pawn, but it also signifies a foolish pedant.
24. Quoted in *L'écriture du rêve*, 55.
25. "Un livre qui envoûte et dérange," 19.
26. "Une roche qui roule sur une pente . . . les mots qu'il avait écrits et fait imprimer dans la tentative dérisoire, vaniteuse et désespérée de laisser quelque livre—son Livre—et communiquerait à ses paroles . . . rien du tout, du papier jauni qui n'intéresse personne, un témoignage perdu dans le désert inculte de son pays empoisonné" (P 190).