

# Memory, Myth and Postmodernism: Pierre Nepveu's *Des Mondes peu habités/Still Lives*

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In *Des Mondes peu habités*, celebrated Québécois author Pierre Nepveu describes a postmodern world in which the grand narratives of historical and cultural memory no longer have the power to provide anchors for identity concerns. In my study of his novel, I wish to examine three major themes : a postmodernist rejection of historical memory and cultural heritage, a return to ancient mythic forms, and a problematic appreciation of the feminine.

*Des Mondes peu habités* was first published in 1992 and translated into English by Judith Weisz Woodsworth as *Still Lives* in 1997. It has not aroused much critical commentary, despite the fact that its author, Pierre Nepveu, is a very well known literary theorist, cultural commentator, and creative writer. Three times winner of Canada's foremost literary prize, the Governor General's award for literature, twice laureate of the Gabrielle Roy Prize for literary criticism, winner of Quebec's highest literary honour, the Prix Athanase-David, invited scholar at many Canadian, European and American universities, Pierre Nepveu is at the centre of literary activities, and has done much to make

Québécois literature known outside of Quebec. However, this highly enigmatic urban novel--his second--remains largely unanalyzed.

In the Euro-American tradition, postmodernism in literature is usually apprehended as either a playful, glitzy refusal of seriousness or a gloom-and-doom apocalyptic approach to the lack of philosophical certitude and the current crisis in representation. Thus, Simon Blackburn writes in the *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*:

In the culture generally, postmodernism is associated with a playful acceptance of surfaces and superficial style ... a celebration of the ironic, the transient, and the glitzy. It is usually seen as a reaction against a naïve and earnest confidence in progress, and against confident in objective or scientific truth. In philosophy, therefore, it implies a mistrust of the *grand récits* of modernity.... While the dismantling of objectivity seems to some to be the way towards a liberating political radicalism, to others ... [i]t licenses the retreat to an aesthetic, ironic, detached, and playful attitude to one's own beliefs and to the march of events... (295).

In former colonies of the British Commonwealth--that is to say, in New World postcolonial countries writing the “new literatures in english”--however, postmodernism is seen quite differently, as many English Canadian and Australian scholars have noted.<sup>1</sup> Linda Hutcheon’s seminal work, *The Canadian Postmodern*, argues that postmodernism’s challenge to “that eternal universal Truth” -with a capital T-- is liberating: postmodernism, she writes, “offers a context in which to understand the valuing of difference in a way that makes particular sense in Canada.” (viii, ix) In French-speaking Quebec, literary postmodernism’s reception is complex. Québécois scholar André Lamontagne notes the difficulty of applying an imported term to a corpus that follows a different literary tradition -- one that, in the words of Linda Hutcheon, “ makes radical experimentation almost a kind of norm” (Hutcheon ix). Lamontagne writes : “La littérature québécoise, comme chacun le sait, a vécu en accéléré des mutations formelles et thématiques qui, dans d’autres littératures nationales, s’étalent sur plusieurs décennies. Dès lors, on peut se demander en opposition à quel modernisme les textes de Yolande Villemaire ou de Jacques Poulin, résolument postmodernes, se sont constitués si les romans de Ducharme, Godbout et Aquin appartiennent eux aussi à la postmodernité” (*Les mots des autres* 248).<sup>2</sup> Feminist writers in Québec have decried the effort to subsume their radical writings under the umbrella term “ postmodernism,” but the term has

slowly come to be accepted in Québec.<sup>3</sup> The numerous complexities of Québécois literary postmodernism are beyond the scope of this paper, but I argue here that Nepveu's novel, *Des Mondes peu habités/Still Lives* reveals a negative Euro-American appreciation of postmodernism, which is not necessarily its usual literary appreciation in Québec.

The novel is set in a vibrant transcultural area of contemporary Montreal, *la Côte-des-Neiges*, near the University of Montreal. The main character, Jerome, loses faith in all his identitary anchors as a young adolescent. This loss is not provoked by any trauma or major incident, it is presented as just "happening," to the mystification of his parents, an ordinary couple who only want him to show some "ambition" (*Still Lives* 12). On the first pages of the novel, all the aspects upon which traditional and modern French-Canadian/Québécois society based its foundational and identitary myths are done away with. History, culture, religion, knowledge, and family --the last stronghold of those caught up in postmodern angst-- all are presented in a cynical and detached voice. Imagining one of his ancestors as a priest, Jerome presents him as someone who "had preached obscurantism from the heights of the pulpit, later procreating in secret with some servant of the good Lord, siring a deviant branch that would not be included in the official family tree" (10). Against a leitmotif of "something versus nothing," Jerome locks himself in his parents' bathroom and attempts to commit suicide.

But he does not “know how to die” (10), and this “descendant of the spiritually crippled” (9) is described him as your typical Euro-American postmodern individual:

“And so, nothing had begun. Instead, everything had ended. A cascade, a kyrie of endings: the death of a few meek or wretched ancestors, the death of Father Brébeuf, then Rome, which had gone up in smoke.... he was not destined for great things. He was not born under one of those lucky stars that confer opulent lives and glorious deaths on men” (10-11).

Having left school and his parents’ home, Jerome finds himself working in a second-hand bookstore, where he feels “oppressed by the cascade of books that bore the world’s knowledge” (11). He has “turned his back on all forms of expression and chosen silence as his vocation” (11). After some years of this non-life, he begins to take pictures, and eventually finds himself working as a photographer for a newspaper. The main advantage of the images he nails down, he says, is that they “revealed nothing about himself.” And then, in 1967, the year of Canada’s centennial celebrations and the World’s Fair in Montreal, everything changes-- for a time.

Now 25 years old, Jerome meets a woman from the South of France, a hostess for the French pavillon at Expo'67. Her name is Arlette Ségala, and with her, so we are told, he moves “from gentle death to explosive life in the space of a moment” (17). They have a child, Lea, for whom he experiences an “abnormal passion” (21), and of whom he takes a photograph every day. All is not well, however, between Arlette and Jerome, and he is haunted by a recurring dream, in which the biblical King Solomon cuts their baby in two with his sword.<sup>4</sup> Arlette, furious because Jerome has transferred his passion from her to their daughter, takes Lea back to France. Although he goes to Europe to find her, he is not successful. Returning to Montreal, Jerome opts to stay in the apartment and to return to his previous state of non-life. His early loss of his daughter causes him to remain frozen in place, while a diverse, vibrant and transcultural Montreal evolves around him. The novel describes his interactions--or lack thereof-- with other inhabitants of the apartment building, including a graduate student, Marc Melville, who is writing his thesis, and Marie-Lourdes, the concierge who, unlike him, can tell “spell-binding tales” about her “countless tenants” (31). Jerome also interacts, somewhat awkwardly, with a middle-aged friend, significantly names Jeanne Beaugrand,<sup>5</sup> who has been left by her husband for a younger woman, because he, the husband, was obsessed by procreation and the need to have a child. Jerome takes a daily picture of people (or places) in his

neighbourhood but never talks to them; Jeanne, who is a volunteer for a Help Line, talks anonymously to people but never meets them. Both of them make frequent references to “souls in distress” (44) and “lost souls” (45). Twenty years after Arlette’s disappearance, Jerome receives a letter from Lea, a letter which had been put in Marc Melville’s mailbox by mistake and which Marc was tempted to take for his own. Lea and Jerome correspond and speak on the phone; he sends her “real letters” about his non-life, but does not tell her about the drama which has just taken place in the building: Marc Melville has committed suicide upon the termination of his thesis on history, language and the Jesuits, and it is Jerome and Marie-Lourdes who find his body in his bathtub. Scraps of his writings are found around the *Côte-des-Neiges* neighbourhood; these are reproduced verbatim in the text. Lea replies to Jerome’s letters by sending enigmatic fictions about a world of mass communications gone awry, where there are few connections between human beings. Eventually, Lea arrives at Mirabel Airport north of Montreal, and an awkward reunion takes place. The typical third-person narration of the novel now becomes a first-person narrative by Lea, who recounts in her journal her impressions of her father, and her strange feelings of danger. “He takes up too much room,” she writes. “Am I not in turn threatened with non-existence, at the very moment that I come close to him?” (138). Jerome has invested an inordinate amount of hope in Lea’s visit, and she

recognizes his need. It angers her, and eventually, they have a terse exchange in the apartment. Jerome flees to the bridge spanning the site of Expo'67 with the intention of throwing himself over its side. But once again, suicide is not an option. The novel ends with a letter from Lea to her mother in France, telling her that she has decided to remain to try to “change [her] father, to slowly turn him away from all the darkness that used to inhabit him” (154).

*Des mondes peu habités* is a very poetic text, and its imagery has an elusive and ambiguous quality. There is no doubt, however, that it encapsulates the negative world view associated with Euro-American postmodernism: birds in cages, unable to fly; telephones that ring without being answered; televisions that blare to no audience; garbage in the streets; urbanites who do not communicate with each other; fragmented memories that go nowhere. Cultural memory, usually transmitted by storytelling, intergenerational discussions, reading, history, art, and --these days, technology-- is dismissed as useless to humans who feel that there is “nothing” in the place of “something.” Critical works devoted to memory in this postmodern age, such as Cathy Caruth’s *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995), Dominique Laporte’s *L’Autre en mémoire* (2006) or Karen McPherson’s *Archaeologies of an Uncertain Future* (2006), are not helpful to a study of this work.<sup>6</sup> No trauma has occurred; Jerome’s nothingness just *is*. There is no archaeological study of the past in this puzzling



novel; just a definitive refusal of its importance, under any guise. Academic approaches to memory framed by Occidental notions of knowledge, then, offer no clues to Nepveu's complex and enigmatic urban novel.

This poetic rendition of a world in chaos rarely names places or dates, but instead universalizes them with an overcoat of mythic discourse. Even recognizable political and cultural events are portrayed through this lens: for instance, dignitaries visiting Expo '67 in Montreal are "princes from another era ... and white-gloved monarchs who smile benevolently and cast a solemn glance over this other-worldly kingdom" (*Still Lives* 18). No specific "*lieux de mémoire*" à la Pierre Nora are found here. The tone of the narration is both poetic and flat : dreams, events, letters, stories, non-events are all run together in this novel, whose fundamental and repeated question is, in the words of one of Jerome's adolescent teachers : "Why there is something rather than nothing?" (121)

Careful and repeated readings of *Des mondes peu habités* reveal that its vocabulary, imagery and structure turn to archaic mythic patterns to replace current discussions of cultural memory, identity and historiography in postmodern Québec.<sup>7</sup> In Quebec, the literary field of myth criticism, based on work by literary scholars such as George Gusdorf (*Mythe et métamorphose*) by historians of religions such as Mircea Eliade (*Myth and Reality*) and by

interdisciplinary cultural scholars such as Claude-Lévis Strauss (*Totemism*), informed the urge to a structuralist approach to literature in the 1960 and 1970s, although the field of *mythanalyse* was lower on the totem pole, I would argue, than *psychanalyse* (psychology applied to literature) or *narratologie* (structuralist study of narrative form) at that time.<sup>8</sup> In English, many of these ideas are to be found in translations of Eliade's work, and in Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, a 12-volume study on magic and religion, which investigates topics such as "Incarnate Human Gods," "The Worship of Trees," and "The Killing of the Divine King."<sup>9</sup> In my study of the manner in which Nepveu's novel proposes a return to a mythic structure, and uses archaic forms of knowing while subverting them to propose a new way of being in a postmodern world, I cite or paraphrase excerpts from Eliade's writings and from Frazer's *Golden Bough*.<sup>10</sup>

The following *foci* obtain in a discussion of archaic myth and Nepveu's novel:

1) "the man [in archaic and traditional societies] finds in myths the exemplar models for all his acts. The myths tell him that everything he does or intends to do *has already been done*, at the beginning of Time, *in illo tempore*" (Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, 124-125, italics in the original).

2) the notion of a man-god, or of a human being endowed with divine or supernatural powers: the divine king (Frazer 106); the need to kill this king before his “natural force” is abated, so that “the world should not fall into decay with the decay of the man-god” (Frazer 310).

3) the killing of the divine king, usually associated with the harvest festival, and the success of the harvest; this regicide occurs when the king is attacked by the group, or by a strong man, who thereupon succeeds to the priesthood or the kingdom (Frazer vi).

4) the killing of a representative of the divine king, usually his son or another highly-regarded man from the group; the divine king’s son dying as a scapegoat for the sins of the people.

5) the cyclical nature of the king’s life, or his son’s life, associated with the cyclical nature of planting and harvesting.

Toward the end of Nepveu’s novel, Jerome’s last name is revealed for the first time: it is Roy, or “king” (roi) in old French. He is, however, a Euro-American postmodern man-god, or king --living *in illo tempore*, where, as an adolescent, he decided to turn his back on knowledge : « nothing had begun... everything had ended.... He had sunk back into a deep sleep, from which he should never have awakened” (*Still Lives* 10). The very flatness of Jerome’s life--the utter absence

of anything new, anything exciting, anything worthwhile-- suggests his belonging to the mythic world of *illo tempore*. Marc Melville, the student who lives above Jerome, in a third-floor apartment and who never seems to sleep, represents the challenger to the divine king. Indeed he is characterized as a “nocturnal tyrant who does everything in his power to deprive Jerome of sleep (maliciously no doubt)” (56).

The noise made by Marc Melville and by his caged bird continually disrupts Jerome’s apartment life; and when and when this “fanatic” (a word frequently associated with Marc Melville) finds himself locked out of his apartment on the night of the summer solstice, he irrupts, uninvited, into Jerome’s space, getting reluctant help from Jerome to climb, significantly, above him, by going from Jerome’s second-floor balcony to his own.<sup>11</sup> A “vigorous successor” is a requirement for the replacement of the divine king (Frazer 310), and Melville is always out jogging around the neighbourhood park; climbing the balcony, his lack of fear of heights stands out against Jerome’s caution. In the novel, he is characterized as god-like, or other-world like, in terms taken from archaic religions as well as from Catholic-based religiosity; like Jesus, he “appear[s] in the flesh, incarnate” (55).

In archaic religions, the divine king’s son is often sacrificed by the king, as a “substitute”; to be acceptable, the son must be “invested, at least for the occasion,

with the divine attributes of the king” ((Frazer 337). Also, embodied “evils” are “transferred to a god who is afterwards slain”; the dying god “take[s] upon himself ... the sins and sorrows of the people” (Frazer 667). Within the archaic mythic structure of this novel, Marc Melville is initially portrayed as the successor of the divine king--the putative son of Jerome, the man-god--whose death will bring about cleansing and a new cycle of life. Various passages dwell on Marc Melville’s association with the same postmodern angst that burdens Jerome: the novel describes “the hellish space of Marc Melville, in his world of unknown labours and solitary pain, the weight of which oppressed him through many long nights” (*Still Lives* 41). The signposts that formerly gave value to a lived life: the acquisition of knowledge, the accomplishment of goals, the feeling of success; love, friends, family, children -- all these are sought after but not found --or not valued-- by Marc Melville. When Melville commits suicide in the bathtub of his apartment--thereby succeeding at death-making where Jerome had failed--Jerome tries very hard to posit his putative successor as a scapegoat/son: he, who, in the words of Sir James Frazer, “is not merely the dying god of vegetation, but also a public scapegoat, upon whom were laid all the evils that had afflicted the people during the past year” (668). “Joy on such an occasion,” remarks Frazer, “is natural and appropriate” (668). And indeed, Jerome tries very hard to see Marc Melville as fulfilling this role: he sometimes thinks that

“Melville’s death ... was a sign that death had done its job and had finished its work of finding victims, right here in his very own neighbourhood, where he lived his life as a man without an identity and without a future” (*Still Lives* 108). Nonetheless, when Marc Melville was alive, Jerome found him wanting in the divine quality that a man-god should possess: there was, Jerome realizes, “a vulnerable quality to his feverish and determined appearance” (59). Is it because Melville still wants? Does he not wander through the stacks of the university library, searching, as he puts it for LLLLOVE? (110) Does he not try “only to connect”?<sup>12</sup> Is he not strongly enough invested in nothingness? Or perhaps it is because he is too closely connected to the historic past, to the Jesuits, those “religious fanatics who perfect the art of being tortured [...] lost in Huron country” (109, 113). In any case, Marc Melville’s suicide does not correspond to the mythic structure that is becoming more obvious in the novel: it does not give joy or a good harvest to the people: instead the concierge is “despondent”, her daughter has “nightmares,” the tenants are “nervous,” and the life of the building is aware of his “insidious presence” that lingers on. (105-6).

It is at this point the novel deviates from traditional archaic myth: Lea, as becomes more and more obvious, is the real challenger. For instance, Jerome has different reactions to words written by the two young people, whom, he thinks, “have something in common : a passion, a secret, a way of looking at things, a

way of being and a way of losing hope” (60). While Marc Melville’s personal writings, which have been scattered throughout the neighbourhood after his death and lie under bushes and in puddles, and which reveal the “emptiness ahead of [him]” (109), seem to pose no threat to Jerome, “[e]verything that Lea had written, even light and innocent things, now seemed priceless, but he could not help feeling that behind them lay a hidden danger, a threat that he alone. ... could exorcise” (108).

The complex imagery of the novel shows that Lea is the true mythic “son.” The passages that follow Jerome receipt of Lea’s initial letter are marked by positive references of a harvest-related nature: inhabitants of the *Côtes-des-Neiges* area are “saluting the return of the sun” (42) under a “perfectly blue sky” (45). Going to the airport to welcome Lea, Jerome uncharacteristically notices “pastures, cornfields and barns [which remind] him of his old uncle’s expropriated and vanished farm” (124). Awaiting the arrival of her airplane, he notices, through an airport window, an approaching storm, and the frantic activity associated with the harvest: “vans and tractors seemed to be on the verge of panic, driving around in a kind of feverish twilight” (124). Once they have met, Jerome has a second uncharacteristic urge: to show Lea “his old uncle’s farm, his grandmother’s house,” the “land of summer holidays” which had been expropriated for the “unreal airport” that is Mirabel (128-9).

Catholic-based religiosity is employed here as complex imagery, wherein Jerome envisages Lea as the Christian god, who will squeeze his body into a ball, squashing him, so that he is aware of nothing except a whistling wind “fading out and dissolving into a memory” (62). Lea will hold this ball in the palm of her hand, and a transformed Jerome will emerge, giving his daughter a Judas kiss, “placing [his] lips on [her] burning cheeks” (63). Both Jerome and Lea are troublingly aware of a subliminal danger in their relationship; as Jerome notes, “For a long time after she left with her mother, he still held on to that powerful and rather stupid sensation, a memory of utter happiness but also of a danger that he had tried to avoid” (68). For her part, Lea is aware of Jerome as a divine king of *illo tempore*: in France, she imagines him as an “adventurer”: who “had left the world of men and the world had no memory of him”, as he “had escaped time.” (104-5). Jerome’s feeling of an impending battle grows: he imagines the airplane carrying Lea to him as a “shell flying toward a target” (115), and imagines that as “a useless father and even an impediment, his time had run out” (115).

Once they have met, there is a major change in the narrative voice of the novel: with the exception of one short passage, it is feminine. We read Lea’s writings in her journal, or letters from Jeanne (Jerome’s friend who is away on holiday in Rome) and from Lea to her mother. These last pages of the novel



carry a hyper-valorization of the feminine: the flower-seller outside Jeanne's hotel window is "very friendly to women" (145); and her letter tells of a "fertility festival" in ancient Rome. Even the Montreal bridge from which Jerome contemplates suicide looks "totally feminine," resembling a dancer with lifted skirts (150). Indeed, throughout the novel, there are repeated references to male characters walking or running uselessly in circles, whereas the female characters walk in straight lines with a purpose, like Lea, or "strid[e] down *Côte-des-Neiges* like school girl[s] on vacation," as does Jeanne (42). More importantly, Lea is presented as an all-knowing being, who recognizes that she and her father are in "an old story" which is "orchestrated by a particular configuration of stars or by a god" (131).<sup>13</sup>

The danger that Lea "felt weighing on her ever since she had arrived" (148) is revealed to be "inside" Jerome (155), and her reaction to it is indeed troubling. Aware of his near-suicide, she reflects on this danger: "It was obscure, irrational and perhaps imaginary. But I was prepared to do everything in my power to make sure that he did not give in to it. I could live with his silences, mysteries and manias, probably because I hoped, without really admitting it, that I could alter them ever so slightly, with time and courage" (155). And Lea, this 22-year-old daughter, decides to stay with her father, instead of returning to France as she had planned. She intends to keep her father from "sinking into oblivion" (155). She

further states that she sees this act as “the very meaning of [her] journey and as a kind of reaching out (clumsy, perhaps, and juvenile) toward beauty” (154). She accepts the burden.

The publicity blurb on the back of the French version of this novel says that it is “a poignant meditation on solitude and on the masculine condition” (n.p., my translation). But why does this urban novel of postmodern angst, under a complex and not-readily-apparent reworking of archaic religious myths, finish with a banal (?) presentation of the young woman as the rescuer of the lost soul that is Jerome? This image of Lea as rescuer is reprised throughout the text: in Lea’s original story written to Jerome from France, she describes an abandoned beach scene, where “a child had left a pair of shoes on the stairs” (84). Inside one of these “little pink running shoes” is a soldier: “The soldier was lying inside the shoe as if it were his place of eternal rest, but he looked ready to wake up if a small hand grabbed him and stood him up again” (84). The image of daughter-as-rescuer could not be clearer.

But how to interpret the ending? It is somewhat open-ended, as the poetic but distanced third-person narrative gives way to the first-person voices of female characters. Reading through the lines of Lea’s writings, one senses initially that the novel is proposing that Lea is set to “replace” her father as the new “divine king.” The images of a conflict between them are strong in the closing passages;

for instance, in her frustration at her father's inability to articulate his inner self, Lea imagines herself attacking him with her fingernails and her "Latin blood" (147). Lea is aware that she has "her own skin to save" (147), and that she is a major player in a pre-ordained ritual: she accepts to be, as she says, "at the end of a circle that is also a beginning" (136). It is probable that Jerome's somewhat catatonic-state after his second attempted suicide represents a death. A Lea-over-Jerome "victory" is intimated in Lea's closing letter to her mother: "I am almost at home now... he is the stranger" (156). If one stays within the pattern of the traditional archaic myth, it is difficult not to criticize this suggested ending, with the text placing a heavy burden on Lea, whom Jerome expects to "bring life... before it becomes completely poisoned or insignificant" (108).

In the letter which closes the novel, Lea imagines her mother reacting to her decision to assume this burden: "with a question mark over your head, not believing your eyes, trying to make me listen to reason" (155). If one were to do an autobiographical reading of this text, one would note where its stories intersect with the life of its author, Pierre Nepveu. In subsequent writings, Nepveu explored his nostalgia for the family farm, expropriated for the creation of the white elephant airport that is Mirabel,<sup>14</sup> and he was in the process of adopting two young girls from Brazil at the time of writing/publishing this novel. Indeed, he has often referred to his primordial need to become a parent at this time.<sup>15</sup> I,

however, am not focused on the autobiographical aspects of this novel, laid out in various interviews with Nepveu in 1992, and in the biographical text written upon Nepveu's winning Quebec's highest literary honour, the 2005 Prix Athanase-David.<sup>16</sup> Instead, I find the discovery of the archaic system which underlies this novel to be fascinating; I began to see its obscure patterns in this apparently contemporary urban postmodern text. To the best of my knowledge, it has not been mentioned in any of the numerous reviews of Nepveu's novel.

The fact that the last pages of the novel are given over (mainly) to the first-person voices of Lea and Jeanne allow for a valorization of the feminine, but that valorization is problematic. If this particular "meditation on the masculine condition" is suggesting that the answer to postmodern solitude and angst and to a dismissal of cultural memory and foundational myths lies in getting one's daughter to bear the burden of the caretaking of the parental soul, then I think that, despite the novel's fascinating and deliberate subversion of the archaic religious system in order to valorize the strength of the feminine, the resolution is not to my liking.

It is possible, however, that a further subversion of the archaic religious pattern is undertaken in *Still Lives*. In Lea's versions of the old stories, cataclysmic events such as storms, earthquakes, and rapes which "destroyed or annihilated everything" need to occur for something to be created (131).

However, the “old story” is subverted here, as Jerome does not die: Lea does not destroy him. It is also possible to read this ending as proposing that Lea has “saved” her father from the ritualistic death, allowing him to accompany her as a co-traveler in a renewed world. This second option is foregrounded in the last pages. Instead of setting out to “win” the struggle, Lea abandons the motif of conflict with Jerome. Rather, she melds with him: “I am very close to him, as I write.... I am in the middle of his distress, as I write. I brush against it and feel it. I listen to it and breathe it in” ... When I come into contact with him, words disappear” (135-6). The last page of Lea’s letter to her mother, which is also the last page of the novel, intimates the formation of a new family unit, comprised of Jerome, Jeanne, and Lea. The imagery is highly positive: Jeanne’s “exuberance” does them good; she will bring them “good luck,” and Lea and Jerome are planning “a trip that [they] might make together” (156). A blended family, “spontaneous affection,” and “favourite places” described with “delicacy and eloquence” are all highlighted on the last page of the novel (156). New memories are about to be made on this father-daughter trip that Jerome has been “dreaming about” ever “since [Lea] was very little” (156). It is possible that the text is indeed proposing that as a society, we can expect more from our daughters than our sons, as the daughters have changed more with the postmodern times, and are better able to accommodate a new order, which works toward

intergenerational and intergendered cooperation and caring, and eschews old structures, old memories, and the need for conflicts decided by death.

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<sup>1</sup> See Bill Ascroft et al., *The Empire Strikes Back*, which distinguishes between “the ‘standard’ British English inherited from the empire and the English which the language has become in post-colonial countries. Though British imperialism resulted in the spread of a language, English, across the globe, the English of Jamaicans is not the English of Canadians, Maoris, or Kenyans” (8). See also “New Literatures,” in Bill Ascroft et al., *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*, 163-4.

<sup>2</sup> “Quebec literature, as everyone knows, has gone through accelerated formal and thematic mutations which, in other national literatures, have been spread out over several decades. One might ask in opposition to which modernism the texts of Yolande Villemaire or Jacques Poulin, which are resolutely postmodern, were constituted (created), if novels by Ducharme, Godbout and Aquin also belong to postmodernity” (my translation).

<sup>3</sup> More recently, very influential writers of *l’écriture au féminin* in Québec, such as Nicole Brossard, have made room for the neologism in their reflective writings. See Karen McPherson’s discussion of Brossard and postmodern writing in *Incriminations* and her more recent *Archaeologies of the Future*. In *Incriminations*, McPherson notes that Toronto Québécoise Janet Paterson describes the “postmodern spirit” in Québécois literature as a “liberating force” in her seminal work, *Moments postmodernes dans le roman québécois*. (McPherson 161, Paterson 20 and 23).

<sup>4</sup> Complex imagery in the novel makes a parallel between King Solomon’s sword and Jerome’s camera as it flashes over Lea’s crib.

<sup>5</sup> “Beaugrand” could be translated as “tall and good-looking.”

<sup>6</sup> Neither does Amritjit Singh’s *Memory and Cultural Politics* help to elucidate the politics of memory in this novel; Pierre Nepveu, a pillar of Québec socio-cultural modernity and postmodernity, is neither ethnic nor American. Closer to home, Dawn Thompson’s *Writing a Politics of Perception* and Régine Robin’s *Le roman mémoriel* offer complex readings of memory in contemporary Quebec fiction. But their penetrating analyses do not offer tools to penetrate the curious work on memory in this novel.

<sup>7</sup> I express my appreciation to my graduate student, Lynne Stafford, who first pointed out the significance of Jerome’s family name to me; this led to the present critical investigation along mythico-religious lines.

<sup>8</sup> The list is long. See also various approaches to the question of myth, society and literature in the work of cultural anthropologists such as Gilbert Durand (*Les Structures anthropologiques de l’imaginaire*). More contemporary manifestations of an ongoing fascination with myth in Québec literature are found in Victor-Laurent Tremblay’s *Au commencement était le mythe* (Ottawa/Paris: Presses de l’Université d’Ottawa, 1991) and my *New World Myth*, which studies postmodernism, postcolonialism and feminism in English-Canadian and Québécois novels.

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<sup>9</sup> I refer in this article to the abridged, one-volume edition of *The Golden Bough*.

<sup>10</sup> I believe it necessary to paraphrase parts of this markedly Eurocentric work which deals with pre-contact cultures; its lack of sensitivity in vocabulary and tone is, hopefully, *dépassé* in contemporary cultural studies.

<sup>11</sup> This event occurs on the summer solstice, the « longest day of the year, » just as Lea's letter arrives with the planting season, in May (*Still Lives* 97). Even the dates correspond with the cyclical nature of planting and harvesting.

<sup>12</sup> E.M. Forster, *Howards End*: “Only connect! That was the whole of her sermon. Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer. Only connect and the beast and the monk, robbed of the isolation that is life to either, will die. (n.d., n.p., [http://www.online-literature.com/view.php/howards\\_end/22?term=only%20connect](http://www.online-literature.com/view.php/howards_end/22?term=only%20connect).) October 21, 2007. In fragments of his writing found after his death, Marc Melville describes his visit to his parents, after his thesis is completed and before his suicide: “Open your arms, tell me that you see right through me, that you detect the stagnation and desolation inside. Don't sit back in your chairs ... pretending that I have my future ahead of me. There is no future” (*Still Lives* 113).

<sup>13</sup> The narrative in Lea's voice is full of references to archaic religions. For instance, groping around in the dark of Jerome's apartment, which has no electricity due to the storm, Lea describes the two of them as “primitive beings deprived of their most basic needs” (142). We learn that Lea “knew” that Jerome was her father when she first saw his name “Roy” as a photographic credit, at the bottom of a newspaper photograph that her mother had kept (140).

<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, Nepveu's *Lignes aériennes*.

<sup>15</sup> See Lucie Côté's review of *Des mondes peu habités* in *La Presse*, which quotes Nepveu, speaking in French: “I had come to the end of a kind of writing, and at that moment arose the feeling that I could not live without [having] children” (B7, my translation)

<sup>16</sup> See « Lauréates et lauréats. » [www.prixduquebec.gouv.qc.ca/recherche/deslaureat.asp?noLaureat=317](http://www.prixduquebec.gouv.qc.ca/recherche/deslaureat.asp?noLaureat=317). April 22, 2007.



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