

LEAVING THE CHURCH: NEW MANIFESTATIONS OF SPIRITUALITY IN POST-QUIET  
REVOLUTION NOVELS BY WOMEN

by

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(Under the Direction of Nina Hellerstein)

ABSTRACT

The Quiet Revolution of 1960 brought with it many changes in the social structure of the province of Québec. For the first time in centuries the Catholic Church lost power over the central institutions of the nation, and the resulting liberation manifested itself in Québécois fiction by women as an explosion of spiritual experimentation, especially through the arenas of Creativity, Sexuality, Maternity, and the Occult. These four arenas allow women to enjoy the full spectrum of the human experience, unlike the patriarchal tradition of the Catholic Church that has long refused to give women access to the most important arenas. The spiritual journeys of the women in Québécois texts after the Quiet Revolution overwhelmingly reject the overly pure image of the Virgin Mary, instead allowing for a more realistic integration of both light and dark elements.

INDEX WORDS: Québecois Literature, Women's Spirituality, Sexuality, Maternity, Creativity, The Occult

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## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to all of my students—past, present, and future—in thanks for the gifts of humor and patience that they give me year after year. In special memory of Meredith Emerson, a student and friend whose beautiful spirit lives on in her loved ones.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

While the literatures of former French colonies in Africa and the Caribbean have experienced a well-deserved rise in popularity across the academic sphere, literature from the French-speaking Canadian province of Québec has been surprisingly slow to catch the interest of the literary world, despite the unique position that Québec holds in the modern literary domain. This is perhaps due to the fact that the society of Québec existed for a long time in something of a cultural and political vacuum, while the rest of the world was moving quickly into the 20<sup>th</sup> century in terms of religious and political thought. A study of women in Québécois literature—especially from the mid-to-late 20<sup>th</sup> century—reveals, in fact, much common ground between the struggles of Québec as a province and the struggles of women in Québec: especially in terms of religious, social and economic issues, these women “have ‘grown up’ with...the province of Québec. Their concerns have mirrored the historical, social, cultural, linguistic, and political events of each passing decade” (Gilbert, Dufault 15). The province’s slow entry into the modern era has been especially painful for the women of Québec, who have often found themselves in the position of being pigeon-holed and oppressed by the powerful Catholic Church. It is therefore appropriate that we see reflected in women’s literature the inevitable rejection of oppressive religious ideology as the province moves into modernity. In this study I will look at the ways in which women writers after the period of the Quiet Revolution not only reject their Catholic past but forge new and non-traditional paths for their spiritual fulfillment. I will suggest four categories into which many of these experiences of spirituality as seen in the literature of post-Quiet Revolution may be placed: creative expression, sexuality, maternity, and the Occult.



Despite its physical and cultural isolation from the rest of the world, Québec at last experienced a strong break—beginning with the onset of the Quiet Revolution in 1960—from the outdated ideologies of previous generations. Less a true revolution than a series of quickly-moving changes in the political landscape of the province (the dominant Catholic Church was at last ousted from its all-powerful position in government, a secular government put in its place), the events of the Quiet Revolution provide an appropriate backdrop for many concurrent literary texts written by women. The Quiet Revolution—beginning in the early 1960’s after the end of the ultra-conservative Duplessis era in Québec—pitted liberal elements in Québec against political and religious oppression in the province. Marking the end of Québec’s blind adherence to the Catholic tradition, the events of the Quiet Revolution pushed the State to adjust its politics to accommodate an increasingly liberal population. While aiming to return a sense of power and autonomy to the people of Québec, whose power had been usurped by what Roger Gaillard calls “une multiplicité d’oppressions” (“l’Angleterre, détentrice souveraine de la Constitution, les traditions rurales, la religion dévote et asphyxiante, les compromis politiques avec les anglophones sourds, car sûrs de leur pouvoir” [23]), the Quiet Revolution did not focus specifically on any part of the women’s movement. Its influence, though secondary, is nonetheless incontestable: women writers, spurred on by the long-awaited changes in the political domain, quickly rose to the occasion. The revolutionary political spirit of the time produced shock waves in the literary scene, encouraging writers to make fast breaks with traditional values and beliefs. The Quiet Revolution emboldened these writers in their desire to create a new paradigm, specifically one that included woman as an individual rather than a necessary cog in the patriarchal wheel. The Church has told women that their original purpose was that of a gift to be “received,” while the man has only to accept the woman as a gift to fulfill

his part of this “complementary” couple (Durkin 65). In looking outside of the Church for spiritual sustenance, women reclaim themselves as a gift not for men but for themselves.

This focus on individualism in post-1960 Québec manifests itself in the world of women’s fiction as “the creation, quite literally, of a ‘new writing,’ *la nouvelle écriture*...influenced in its approach to language by French post-structuralism, and materially centered on the body, . . . closely related to *l’écriture au féminin* (not to be confused with *écriture féminine*)” (Dickinson 137). More than a political statement that would pass with the early 1960’s, this new woman’s writing attests to the blossoming of various forms of mystical experience in Québécois women’s writing. Texts from the decades after the Quiet Revolution provide us with women characters who struggle to break free from the social, political, economic and psychological prisons of the patriarchal Catholic system. In the wake of the political renewal, we at last see women writers of Québec seeking forms of spiritual expression that validate their worth as human beings.

The rejection of the Church that we find in these texts does not, however, find women turning to other organized religions to appease the soul’s need for contact with the divine. Women writers of modern Québec reject not only Christianity—the history of which is considered by some as “a history of how women were silenced and deprived of their rights” (Ranke-Heinemann 127)—but all forms of organized, patriarchal religion. It is for this reason that I will insist on the distinction between institutionalized, doctrine-based religion and the non-hierarchical, personal experience of “spirituality”. As there exist as many definitions of the concept of spirituality as there are writers to reinvent it, I have chosen a flexible definition that speaks more to self-searching than to searching for any kind of higher power. As stated by Judith

Antonelli, “spirituality is a worldview...which includes the nonvisible and nonmaterial. It deals with the collective psyche (soul) of humanity” (400):

In truth, there is nothing ‘mystical’ or ‘other worldly’ about spirituality. The life of the spirit, or soul, refers merely to a function of the mind. Hence spirituality is an intrinsic dimension of human consciousness and is not separate from the body; e.g., the Greek concept of *pneuma* meant breath or spirit or soul, and *spirit* comes from the Latin root for ‘to breathe’. (Young-Eisendrath xv)

Such a definition allows for the inter- and intra-personal aspects of spirituality, which do not necessarily include the existence, or belief in the existence of a “Higher Power”. Spirituality as expressed in these texts often manifests itself on a purely psychological level: instead of an individual’s relationship with an unseen and unknown God, it becomes an individual’s relationship with the mysterious, intangible, essential parts of her own identity.

Even in the best of situations, the Catholic Church has never been very kind to women. Women have been told that any role besides mother and wife is unbecoming to them and detrimental to their family (Cahill 261). They have been told that their husbands have authority over them, and yet only the Church has authority over their husbands (Cahill 257). The “equality” that woman was promised has turned out to be “a smaller sphere of freedom, self-determination, and social leadership than is allotted to men,” and that she should take great pride in filling this less significant role. Her body has been systematically removed from her own control and subjected to countless maternities regardless of her financial, physical, or emotional ability to care for her offspring. Finally, she has been refused any real position of power in an institution that nonetheless presumes to define the parameters of her existence, for the “special feminine vocation to love” should be far more valuable to her than any position of influence

(Cahill 262). The startling contradiction is too clear: while being put on a pedestal as the image of the Mother of God and convinced that their sacrifices would be duly rewarded, women have in fact been refused any meaningful role both in the Church's creation and history and in Québécois society.

The revisioning of the role that women play in Québécois society carries with it a strong spiritual element, in part due to the overwhelming role of the Catholic Church there, and also because a redefining of one's spiritual nature carries with it the necessity of a redefining of one's role in society. This culturally specific influence of the Church aside, the reimagining of women's social and cultural identity implies a spiritual revolution as well:

[T]he women's revolution...is a spiritual revolution, pointing beyond the idolatries of sexist society and sparking creative action in and toward transcendence. The becoming of women implies universal human becoming. It has everything to do with the search for ultimate meaning and reality, which some would call God. (Mary Daly qtd. in Van Dyke 5)

Coinciding with Québec women's growing refusal of reactionary values is a reconsideration of the role of spirituality in the lives of women. Previously forbidden themes are resuscitated and explored as ways in which women may experience their own spirituality—not by way of a higher power, but by finding that which is divine within themselves. I will explore four especially compelling areas in which we see emergent forms of women's spirituality: creativity, sexuality, maternity, and occult practices. Women writers of the post-1960 era explore these themes as sites of personal spiritual growth, a refreshing alternative to the Catholic Church that reigned over Québécois society for centuries.

A glance at the background of women's role in Québécois literature will help set the scene for the revolutionary changes to come during and following the Quiet Revolution. This expectation of women to fill the role of wife, mother, and guardian of the Catholic faith, with the sole alternative of a life in the convent, is played out in the traditional literature of Québec, most notably the *roman de la terre* (alternatively called *roman du terroir*), which expresses many thematic elements that stem in large part from Québec's roots in Catholicism, specifically in terms of women's implied role as wives and mothers: "Women play a role in the roman du terroir as long as they are maidens waiting to be married; once this single goal is accomplished, they commonly fade out of sight, often physically dying off, like Maria Chapdelaine's mother" (Green 66). The Catholic Church's teachings on women are reflected in these texts, the women obediently limiting themselves to the realm of "children, kitchen, and church" as Augustine would have liked (Ranke-Heinemann 127). This explicit definition of the masculine and feminine roles rendered the simple, predictable life that was the aspiration of the era, as evoked in the following passage from the quintessential example of this genre, *Maria Chapdelaine*:

La vie avait toujours été une et simple pour eux: le dur travail nécessaire, le bon accord entre époux, la soumission aux lois de la Nature et de l'Église. Toutes ces choses s'étaient fondues dans la même trame, les rites du culte et les détails de l'existence journalière tressés ensemble, de sorte qu'ils eussent été incapables de séparer l'exaltation religieuse qui les possédait d'avec leur tendresse inexprimée.

(Hémon 113)

The accordance of the same level of importance to each of these elements of life in rural Québec—hard work, positive marital relations, submission to the laws of nature and of the Church—reflects the great extent to which these values are woven into the fabric of the *roman de*

*la terre*, with its overwhelmingly patriarchal perspective. While Québec fought for intellectual respect and political independence, it remained under France's patronizing gaze; it is therefore interesting to note that Hémon is not Québécois but French, contributing to the image of Québec as a culturally colonized province. The condescending tone of the novel is highlighted by the fact that Hémon writes from the perspective of the mother country, who tends to see the Québécois population as "un petit peuple 'qui ne sait pas mourir'" (Beaudoin 23).

The title character of *Maria Chapdelaine* provides a clear example of the traditional Québécois woman of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century: sacrificing her romantic dreams of a marriage based on love, Maria instead marries a man who can provide for her and for her future children. Following in her mother's footsteps, Maria will spend her days cooking and cleaning for her children and her husband, fulfilling the destiny of all women of this genre: "La norme du roman de la terre consiste à réserver aux femmes un rôle secondaire, des épousailles au service de la nation" (Proux 239). Women writers of the decades following the Quiet Revolution called into question the fundamental values of this genre, rejecting these limitations as obsolete as they looked for other ways of experiencing the divine.

The centrality of the maternal role in these texts reminds us that women, though limited in their life choices, were at the core of home life. Due in part to the economic necessity of large families in an agricultural society such as Québec (a rural Québécois family had little hope of survival without many hands to help work the land), the importance of the mother figure cannot be overemphasized. The role of women was thus defined by this maternal imperative, and the importance of the maternal role was expressed not only by the economic necessity of the time but also by the doctrine of the Catholic Church, which forbade the use of contraception and

encouraged prolific reproduction. The caretaking duties assigned to women extended to the spiritual realm as well:

The Catholic imagery pervading the Québécois collective consciousness has inevitably been intricately linked with the portrayal of mothers in Québécois literature in general and in the works of Anne Hébert and Marie-Claire Blais. It has been observed that mothers in Quebec were traditionally the guardians of the faith in the Québécois family and social structure, and that they helped the priests transmit Catholic values to future generations. (Dufault 187)

While women were seen as guardians of the Catholic faith, “it was assumed that men were too busy struggling outside the home to make a living to be concerned with cultural and spiritual matters” (Gould, *Setting Words Free* 618). This exclusion of women from the adventures of the world outside the home is hardly a new occurrence:

Nations have without exception been the creation of fathers, wild spaces tamed and mapped and bordered by them, in order that they may be passed on to sons...Nations without exception have used women as reproducers and educators and nurturers, all the while excluding them from power and from public space.  
(Patricia Smart in Dickinson 154)

Québécois women find themselves in the especially unfortunate position of being oppressed not only as women in relation to men and as inferior “vessels” in the eyes of the Church, but also being in the minority as members of the French-speaking population of Canada. In the years leading up to the Quiet Revolution, both men and women found themselves disempowered by a Church that controlled all aspects of Québécois life and gave back little in return. The men of

Québec at that time are therefore not only in the position of oppressing women, but are oppressed—politically, socially, and economically—in turn:

[T]he situation of women in Quebec, especially prior to the 1960's, although deplorable was, in one sense, similar to that of *québécois* men: both groups led a colonized existence under the economic and linguistic dominance of English and the powerful authority of Church and State. Both groups developed signs of feelings of impotency, inferiority, and alienation, characteristic of colonized peoples. The female literary tradition was greatly overshadowed by the necessity of survival. Women tended to support men as *Québécois*, rather than attack them as oppressors. (Gilbert Lewis 5)

It is important to note, however, that the rejection of the powerful Catholic Church reaches well beyond the realm of religious belief or “faith”. The fervent nationalism of Québécois culture, equally if not more widely known than the province’s firm grounding in Catholicism, appears at least in part as a reaction against the historical threat posed by the more powerful British. While the strong Catholicism of Québec may appear to have evolved separately from the province’s intense nationalism, the two aspects of Québécois culture are closely linked. While nationalism has served as a unifying force for the Québécois population, Catholicism has historically acted as a defining factor of this nationalism, differentiating French from English-speaking Canadians. Marilyn Wesley writes of this link between nationalism and religion in Québec: “[M]uch of the endeavor to retain a separatist identity has taken on the form of a celebration of French Catholicism in the face of English Protestantism” (Pearlman 47). The power of Catholicism in Québécois society is thus not necessarily a result of religious fervor, but



rather explained, at least partly, by the underlying nationalist sentiment that loyalty to the Catholic Church implies.

The fact that it remained for so long a monopolizing force in Québec's political and social structure is perhaps more a testament to the power of tradition and ritual than proof of any sort of mystical faith among the Québécois people. The oppressive force of the Catholic Church served for centuries, in fact, as a preventative measure against the blossoming of more personal experiences of spirituality, especially for women. It was, after all, in the Church's best interest to guard against the exploration of other, less restrictive forms of spirituality.

It may appear a simplification to blame the historical oppression of women (and politically and economically, Québécois men also) on the Catholic Church's overwhelming presence in Québec. Before delving into a discussion of the struggle of Québécois women writers to extricate themselves from the values of an oppressive religion, it is important to examine and isolate those elements of Catholic tradition that most clearly impact the role of women in society. Marie-Andrée Roy comments on women's lack of power within the Catholic Church, pointing specifically to the "ghetto-isolation of women...their marginalisation within the sphere called female...their exclusion from the sites of power" (Joy et al 27). This is precisely the aspect of Catholicism that is so problematic for feminist writers and thinkers, that women have two choices in terms of role models in the Catholic tradition: Eve the temptress or the Virgin Mary. Women are seen first and foremost as seductive creatures, the weaker counterparts to men who will lead men to sinful behavior when given the chance. Authorities of the Catholic Church (such as Augustine) have routinely denounced women, commanding that they dress themselves "in mournings and rags...redeeming thus the fault of having ruined the human race." Going on to curse the entire gender, they write: "You are the door of hell; you corrupt him whom

the devil dare not approach, you finally are the cause why Jesus Christ had to die”

(Hajdukowski-Ahmed 61). The latter condemnation comes, of course, from Eve’s sinful legacy that made it necessary for human beings to be redeemed by Jesus Christ.

With the birth of the Christian story, women appear to be redeemed in the idealized image of the Virgin Mary. However, this promise is misleading: the exemplary mother of God reveals herself to be a mere vessel for procreation, a symbol of self-sacrificing maternity and a disembodied ideal of femininity. Women are therefore both exalted and demonized in the Catholic tradition; there is as yet no room in this tradition for a humanized vision of women. A woman is either a seductive temptress in league with the devil or a pure vessel for man’s creative seed. The only positive role granted women is that of a self-sacrificing mother; yet what woman can live up to the standard of purity set by the myth of Mary, a woman who conceived a child and gave birth while remaining a virgin? Women have indeed lost the race before it began in this conception of femininity, for the mythical standard of femininity is self-contradictory and unattainable. Traditional Catholicism asks the impossible: that women be mothers (a role necessarily attached to the body, not only of the mother herself but of her children as well) while maintaining, as does the Virgin Mary, utter innocence in the face of all that is physical and, above all, sexual. Julia Kristeva ponders the problematic figure of the Virgin Mary:

Qu’est-ce qui, dans la représentation du Maternel en général, et en particulier dans la représentation chrétienne, c’est-à-dire virginale, du Maternel, telle qu’elle réussit à suturer l’angoisse sociale et à combler un être mâle, satisfait une femme, de sorte que la communauté des sexes soit établie au-delà et malgré leur flagrante incompatibilité et guerre permanente? Qu’est-ce qui, par ailleurs, dans ce Maternel, ne tient pas compte de ce qu’en dirait ou voudrait une femme, de sorte

que lorsque aujourd'hui elles se mettent à prendre la parole, c'est là-dessus que porte fondamentalement leur mécontentement (32)

It is worthy of note that such limitations on the spiritual identities of women were not always the norm, however, not even in the Catholic Church. Women were not always excluded from the administrative roles of the church, and women in fact had much greater powers in the church centuries ago than they possessed in the early to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century:

From the seventh to the tenth centuries, there were mushrooming communities of women governed by abbesses, who frequently assumed powers usually reserved for bishops, abbots and ordained clergy, such as hearing the confessions of their nuns. It is also remarkable that in double monasteries of monks and nuns, the abbess was usually the main authority for both communities. She exercised both religious and secular powers. She was responsible for the feudal obligations of the vassals and for the administration of the lands. (Mananzan 62)

What happened, then, to transform women's role from one of considerable power and authority to the subservient role of wife and mother? The 12<sup>th</sup> century is seen by many as a turning point during which there were increased efforts to curtail women's authority in the Church, and the Decretum of 1140 ruled that only men could be ordained in the Catholic Church. Authority in the Church was thus limited to men and women were cloistered in the home and excluded from real involvement in the goings-on of church life. Those religious groups that attempted to exist outside of these misogynistic regulations were proclaimed heretical (Mananzan 63). Thus the modern Catholic Church morphed into a patriarchal, misogynist establishment. Women were rejected as figures of power and influence in the Church, allowed now only to participate in more passive ways that fit with the Church's definition of women as weak-minded and fragile. The

increasingly binary vision of women as either the creators of sin (Eve) or the virgin mother of God (Mary) forced them into a corner in which their existence was defined by their efforts to emulate the Virgin in the roles of wife and mother. It is in the conflicted space between forgotten daughter and worshipped mother, between carnal sexuality and self-sacrificing maternity, that women in 20<sup>th</sup> century Canada began to question their adherence to a faith that held them in such ambivalent esteem.

In her article “Divine Women,” Luce Irigaray bemoans the lack of community among women in traditional patriarchal society, most notably in the construction of the male Trinity-based Christian religions: “According to this world, these worlds, female identity always comes down to empirical parameters that prevent a woman, and the world of women, from getting themselves together as a unit” (*Joy Divine* 47). Women's spiritual lives are restricted to the realm of their function as wife and mother, as demonstrated in the *roman de la terre*. In contrast, the re-defining of spirituality that is manifested in post-Quiet Revolution texts exhibits an unprecedented unification of women, and their cooperative rebellion appears to form new bonds between Québécois women. This kind of woman-to-woman bond being unprecedented in Québécois society before the Quiet Revolution, it serves in and of itself as an act of rebellion against the status quo. Many of the texts that I will discuss show women in alliance with one another both in creation and in consequence of this new spiritual order (or lack of order, more appropriately).

In the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as Québec broke away from the old vision of a quaint and peacefully submissive culture, the power of the Church was diminished in the public sphere and the Québécois people asserted their autonomy in relation to English-speaking Canada. This revolutionary spirit necessarily spilled over into the literary domain as previously accepted

values were examined and found lacking and new rules were formed for Québécois society. The gender hierarchy that had long been nourished by the Catholic Church crumbled under the revolutionary spirit of the 1960's. As the French-speaking population of Canada asserted its linguistic and political rights, women began to reassess their position in Québécois society. They found that the identity created for them by the Church no longer fit, and they needed to find another identity:

Quelle angoisse certains après-midi—Québécité—québécoitude—je suis autre. Je n'appartiens pas à ce Nous si fréquemment utilisé ici—Nous-autres—Vous-autres...L'incontournable étrangeté...Autre, à part, en quarantaine, à la recherche d'un langage (Verduyn 52, quoting Régine Robin's *La Québécoite*)

Women writers during and after the Quiet Revolution must therefore create a new place for themselves in this literary universe. It is this unique and quite sudden change in the depiction of women and their spiritual lives that I will be examining in this study. The great metamorphosis that manifests itself in the spiritual lives of women of modern Québec is necessarily concomitant with a redefining of what it means to be a woman in Québec, and what place they hold in this unique society. Women's fiction from the era of the Quiet Revolution and afterward acts as a sounding board in the search for a new place in the Québécois conscience, leading to a sweeping movement toward valorization of personal spiritual experience over that of a collective one. It is precisely the psychological space between Québécois women's long-standing social limitations and their recent quest for spiritual fulfillment that will be the focal point of this study. The loss of faith in the Catholic set of values is immensely significant in forming the fabric of Québec's modern society. It is important to note, however, that this literature does not lose all ties with the divine; instead, it reimagines the form of the divine,

which now begins to look less like a man than like a woman. Perhaps because women were considered to be the guardians of the Catholic faith, women's literature maintains a connection to the intangible, mystical side of existence.

Marie Couillard and Francine Dumouchel discuss the increasingly gynocentric fiction of Québec: "Au Québec des années '70, des femmes comme Anne Hébert, Marie-Claire Blais, Louky Bersianik et Nicole Brossard ont-elles tout mis en oeuvre pour déconstruire, subvertir le modèle androcentrique et en re-cr  er un   partir d'elles-m mes" (*La Gynocritique*, 78). The movement away from the rigidity of the Catholic experience and towards a more unstructured spirituality engages a spiritual "jouissance," a hedonistic exploration of those areas of women's psyches that were previously uncharted. No longer limited to a strict religious dogma, this spiritual experience entered the previously forbidden realm of pleasure. This rewriting of a male-centered literature requires a recreation of spirituality for women that will allow the pleasurable facets of spirituality (most notably sex) that for all of modern history have been denied. There are numerous authors who have had tremendous impact in this area, making an exhaustive discussion impossible. Four authors in particular are especially influential in the creation of a new spiritual landscape for women in late 20<sup>th</sup> century Qu b cois literature: Anne H bert, Marie-Claire Blais, Louky Bersianik, Jovette Marchessault.

H bert's writing combines criticism of dogmatic religious practice with a more traditional novelistic style and more objective tone, but this criticism does not reject spiritual practice on the whole: paranormal spiritual practices make regular appearances in her texts, and it is H bert's texts that will make up the majority of my discussion on the Occult. H bert attempts to draw out those aspects of Catholicism that rely more on individual experience than strict adherence to an arbitrary set of rules, evoking mystical similarities between traditional

Catholicism and the subversive realm of Witchcraft. The simultaneous validation of the more esoteric elements of Catholicism and the criticism of the lack of freedom for women to choose their life paths are especially evident in texts like *Les Enfants du Sabbat*, *Kamouraska*, and *L'Enfant chargé de songes*. Each text utilizes the theme of the Occult to draw attention to the breach between women's submission to the established order and their desire for a more deeply fulfilling existence, with the themes of creativity, sexuality, and maternity all woven into the mesh of her narrative. It must be noted that Anne Hébert does not always turn a critical eye towards the Catholic religion, as much of her earlier works are known for their strong religious overtones. Her criticism of certain troublesome aspects of the Church is made all the more credible in the absence of a broad dismissal of the religion.

Bersianik and Marchessault are particularly representative of the *nouvelle écriture* practiced by Québécois women writers of the twentieth century that “brings new models, a new language, into being and transforms the accepted norms by pointing out their nonsense and absurdity” (*La Gynocritique*, 77). Unlike the more subtle choices that we find in Hébert's texts, these two authors express their disillusionment regarding the status quo of Québécois society through sarcasm and black humor. This cynicism proves a biting means of criticizing the inequity of so many aspects of Québécois society. Of the four writers, Bersianik and Marchessault most reflect the ideas of the radical feminists of their time. Bersianik's writing is futuristic and provocative in tone, and the choice of a science fiction framework—including the themes of interplanetary travel, extraterrestrial creatures, and shape-shifters—allow Bersianik to set herself apart from her contemporaries and allow a higher level of symbolic meaning in her text: “Les révélations de la littérature fantastique féminine actuelle nous ramènent dans la voie de la vie et de la sagesse. Car les exigences de la nature qu'elle incarne ne sont pas seulement

matérielles, mais aussi spirituelles” (Richter 195). Bersianik opens her writing to new spiritual and social possibilities in choosing science fiction as her genre, for the science fiction genre provides “new role models, and new social and possibly technological culture patterns,” as well as “a special opportunity for the [experiment in thinking] in which social patterns and societies can be tested to destruction” (*Women Worldwalkers* 25).

As in the texts of Marie-Claire Blais, satire is Bersianik’s weapon of choice against the forces of oppression, and Bersianik’s clever manipulation of language underscores this choice. This use of language on the part of a woman writer caught the French-speaking world by surprise, for although satire and irony appeared frequently in the writings of English-speaking women writers, they had never quite made their way into the texts of Francophone women writers. The unfamiliar sarcasm adds to the revolutionary tone of texts like *L’Euguélonne* and *Le Pique-Nique*. Bersianik aims her most biting criticism at the spiritual and intellectual imprisonment of women by the Catholic Church: her massive text *L’Euguélonne* is a parody of the Bible, and she rejects without exception the institutions of Catholicism and Christianity, portraying the Church as one more patriarchal institution that serves to make slaves of women and gods of men. The groundbreaking and expansive nature of this text presents quite a challenge to anyone undertaking its analysis: there are so many elements worthy of discussion that it proves nearly impossible to discuss only a handful. I will therefore focus my discussion on those parts of *L’Euguélonne* that are most relevant to a discussion of women’s spirituality in post-Quiet Revolution Québec.

Marie-Claire Blais, whose writing style fits loosely between the revolutionary tone of Bersianik and Marchessault and the more traditional narrative form that we see in Hébert’s works, provides an in-depth look at the complexity of relationships between women in many of



her novels, most notably the semi-autobiographical *L'Ange de la Solitude*. The validation of lesbianism found in many of her texts resonates with the validation of women's sexuality found in works by all three of the other writers that I will discuss, and all suggest sexuality as one avenue to self-discovery. The lesbian relationships of Blais' texts take this self-discovery a step further, allowing women to explore their own spiritual identity through sexuality but also that of women as a collective. Hébert, Blais, Bersianik and Marchessault all introduce the foreign element of pleasure, whether sexual or artistic, into their women characters' lives as a means of spiritual fulfillment.

Each of these writers presents revolutionary possibilities for women's spiritual experience in the rapidly-evolving society of Québec. Claiming a personal and fulfilling inner life as essential to existence, women begin to refuse the patriarchal model for their identity and claim their existence as their own. The marginal and subversive figures of the actress, the lesbian, and even the Witch are brought back from exile and accepted into the fold. Breaking drastically with the Catholic ideal of the obedient wife and mother, they discover different channels for their spirituality through creative expression, sexuality, maternity, or paranormal experience.

The ideas in these texts encompass more than the changing social atmosphere of the Québécois province: they are part of a much larger movement including numerous feminist writers and thinkers of the 1960's and 70's. The dedication of Bersianik's *L'Euguélionne* underscores the interdependence of the worldwide community of women writers in the creation of a new identity for women: "à Simone de Beauvoir avant qui les femmes étaient inédites et à Kate Millett grâce à qui elles ne sont plus inouïes". Referencing two influential feminists, neither of them from Québec, Bersianik asserts her place in the global women's movement. Many

women writers of Québec more obscure than Bersianik have made remarkable contributions to the movement, showing that—far from being isolated on their “few acres of snow”—women writers of post-1960 Québec played and continue to play an important role in the expanding image of women in relation to the world around them. There is nonetheless much damage to be repaired: Hélène Cixous reminds us that women have not only been oppressed but, even worse, have been led “insidieusement, violemment, à haïr les femmes, à être leurs propres ennemies, à mobiliser leur immense puissance contre elles-mêmes” (41). An important part of this process is therefore the healing of relationships between women, and the creation of a community in which women may find spiritual support away from the damaging influence of the Church.

It must be noted that these writers are not the first to refuse the negative image of women that they found portrayed in patriarchal thought. In response to texts like Jean de Meung’s *Roman de la rose*, in which women are presented as naturally fickle, Christine de Pizan “lifts up a catalog of wise female rulers and learned and virtuous women and argues that women’s defects come, not from their natures, but from their subordinate status and lack of education (Ruether 127). Over 500 years later, the same thought drives our authors in their writing. Presenting new and liberating possibilities of spiritual “jouissance,” Anne Hébert, Marie-Claire Blais, Louky Bersianik and Jovette Marchessault unite themselves with a worldwide community of women who search for a true expression of their spiritual experience. Refusing to continue experiencing the divine vicariously through men, these Québécois women writers are insisting upon a vital spiritual existence of their own, created from their own personal experiences. This must include a rejection of their designation as inferior to men, a problem confronted by Bersianik in *L’Eugélonne*: “Et surtout, St. Siegfried, ne priez plus pour elles! Car elles en ont assez, m’ont-elles dit, des Capitalistes de l’Espèce qui prient pour elles et vivent à leur place!” (375).

## Chapter 2 Creativity

The quest for a creative outlet is essentially a spiritual one: a search for that part of the self that is intangible and elusive, and yet is unique to an individual. Joseph Campbell writes that when one beholds an artistic creation (whether it be a sunset or a painting) and feels moved, it is a “recognition of divinity,” but not of a divinity that lives outside oneself and demands to be worshipped: “It is *your* divinity, which is the only divinity there is” (154). The literature of post-Quiet Revolution Québec, during which the conservative Catholic government was replaced by a more liberal and secular one, presents numerous images of women who sacrifice the oft-imposed roles of wife and mother for the more public and self-affirming roles of actress, writer, painter, performer. These are positions that have normally been reserved for men, as women’s creativity has been limited to the ability to produce and raise children:

Traditionally, women’s creativity has been bracketed by their reproductive bodies. That is, historically women have found (or been forced to find) their creative outlet by bearing and raising their children. Maternity has been valued as the highest form of creativity available to women. (Hoeveler xi)

While it is true that numerous characters in these texts (as I will study in detail in Chapter 4) do find spiritual fulfillment in the maternal relationship (both physical and metaphorical), many women that we meet in these texts are ready to break away from the constraints of a Church that tells them that motherhood is the only possibility open to them. These women seek a more self-oriented creativity that does not necessarily garner the approval of the patriarchal powers that be. Desperately seeking an arena in which they may explore their creative potential,

these characters find themselves plunged into a spiritual quest that amounts to much more than the artistic creations that they may produce. It is the process much more than the product, for these women, that amounts to a profound spiritual experience:

L'acte créateur à travers certains livres, certains tableaux, m'apparaissait comme la représentation d'une multitude de triangles passionnels se regroupant au cœur de l'être humain. C'est de ce regroupement qu'émanait la source de l'extase créatrice...Ces triangles, semblables à des têtes de flèches, se dirigeaient non pas vers le passé ou l'avenir, mais vers l'éternité. Oui, l'acte créateur avec sa géométrie spirituelle et magique, orientait ses pointes, ses équations, dents de scie et autres forces routières vers le Cœur du Monde, le Cœur des êtres.

(Marchessault *Comme une enfant* 124)

This essential connection between the creative and the spiritual is manifested in a striking number of Québécois texts written by women; this theme extends to the theatre scene, as plays of the post-Quiet Revolution period express the spiritual unrest of their era. The popularity of feminist theatre companies such as the ironically-named “Théâtre des cuisines” (snubbing the Church’s long-held assertion that women belong in the kitchen) along with other smaller and lesser-known groups, made clear this powerful connection between the self-searching and self-affirming desires that lead women to express themselves creatively, and the search for a spiritual core that goes beyond the limits of their strong Catholic heritage (Gould, “Setting” 636).

The women who choose to pursue careers in writing, painting, and performance are snubbing the Church in a few important ways. Women are warned that involvement in any “career” or position outside mother and wife might “erode their ‘femininity’ or reduce the recognition given to ‘the value of their maternal and family role’” (Cahill 261). It is in blatant

disregard for this most typical of Church admonishments that some of the characters in these texts choose to entirely abandon their families to explore those creative pursuits that will help them touch their own spiritual essence. In some texts the role of motherhood is replaced by other more self-focused creative endeavors such as performing, writing, or painting. The treatment of mothers' relationships with their children in post-1960 writings in Québec exhibits the tensions resulting from the mother's desire for a fulfilling creative (spiritual) life and the child's need for a nurturing mother. The considerable ambivalence towards the mother in these texts, shown by the creation of female characters who seek out identities that are separate from those of their children, may seem at first glance to indicate a crisis in mother-child relationships in this literature, pointing to deterioration of the close bond between a mother and her offspring. A closer look at this dynamic in these texts suggests that this is not the case, and in fact the exact opposite may be happening. In sacrificing the ideal of all-consuming maternity for personal fulfillment through their own creative pursuits, the mothers in many of these texts provide their daughters a more complex role-model, a woman who considers herself important enough to merit time, energy and attention. These mothers create distance between their lives and those of their children, who in turn learn that it is acceptable to seek out more individualistic sources of fulfillment. This is especially significant in the relationships between women characters and their daughters, as generational differences and quickly evolving values and beliefs have alienated mothers from daughters.

The increased creativity and independence of women that we see in these texts where maternal obligations are eschewed in favor of personal creative fulfillment points to a fundamental shift in Québécois society: "The figure of the mother-artist represents the possibility for social change, since mothering is reproduced through daughters who become mothers"

(Gerber 9). So while the figure of the negligent mother is hardly validated in these texts, she is sometimes presented as an unfortunate product of a society that puts far too much weight on the value of a fertile womb and too little on a fertile imagination. The future of the artist-mother, however, appears to be much more positive, as she learns to negotiate the space between maternal self-sacrifice and personal creative fulfillment.

The first three works that I will examine deal with actress-mothers, women characters torn between their maternal obligations and the enticement of the stage. Hébert's *Le Premier jardin* takes begins in Paris and quickly transitions to Québec City, where actress Flora Fontanges searches not only for her daughter but also for memories of her own childhood as she undergoes her transformation into the character of Winnie in *Oh! les beaux jours*. Her career as an actress allows her to let her imagination run wild as she learns not only who she is as an individual but also where she fits in among the many women of Québec that came before her. While I will not discuss *Kamouraska's* Elisabeth in detail in this chapter, it should be noted that the heroine's penchant for drama suggests that she may be an ancestor to the "actress-mother" that we find in later texts. Instead of pursuing a career in theatre, Elisabeth creates high drama in her mundane life: "Et moi, je suis une femme de théâtre. Émotions, fièvres, cris, grincements de dents. Je ne crains rien. Sauf l'ennui. J'irai jusqu'au bout de ma folie. C'est une obligation que j'ai. Je suis lancée. Puis je me rangerai" (78). The next actress-mother that I will discuss in Marie-Claire Blais' *Tête Blanche* is perhaps less sympathetic but no less revealing of the importance of creative work for the women of post-1960 Québec. "Tête Blanche's" mother has all but abandoned him to pursue her career in the arts, and we experience the child's difficulty in dealing with the mother's choice of independence. As we will also see in the character of Sophie in Blais' *L'Ange de la solitude*, creative work is of utmost importance for this mother, as she

finds far more fulfillment and meaning in an audience's approval than in a maternal bond. Sophie is unique, however, in that she is in the position of helping foster her daughter's creativity, albeit begrudgingly. The other female characters in this text provide rich examples of women finding spiritual fulfillment through creative work, whether it be writing, painting, or performing. Louky Bersianik's two works, *L'Euguélonne* and *Le Pique-nique sur l'Acropole* provide philosophical arguments that support the expression of women's creativity, also condemning the frequent repression of women's artistic aspiration in past years. Similar to Bersianik in tone and message, Jovette Marchessault's *Comme une enfant de la terre* stresses the mystical connection between the body and the spirit. This connection is especially manifested in the act of writing, as well as drawing and painting.

The theatre has long been seen as a hedonistic career, an arena where sexual promiscuity and lewd behavior abound. A great deal of mistrust surrounds the instability, transience, and unpredictability of those who choose this profession: this mistrust of actors, who Plato considered to be professional liars, is greatly increased when the actor is a woman (Davis 294). What is it about the theatre, then, that makes it an attractive setting for women writers in post-Quiet Revolution Québec? The choice of actress for these women characters is of particular significance, as the profession of actress has frequently been equated with that of prostitute (Davis 296). The stereotype of the promiscuous, flighty, irresponsible actress has continued into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, encouraged by media coverage of celebrity actresses who fit this image perfectly. The over-sexualized and immoral actress is the polar opposite of the idealized image of the Virgin Mary, the moral ideal for all Catholic women. The actress is not only seen as a societal pariah but is also condemned as unfit for the role of mother.

The psychological complexity of the actress-mother stems in part from her conflict between two extreme positions in regards to the society in which she lives: that of the loving mother whose self-sacrifice is paramount, and that of the self-centered actress whose career must come before her children. In opposing these two roles in one persona, Hébert and Blais raise questions about maternity, independence, and creativity, and the choices that women make in regards to these issues in their lives. Numerous texts of this time present women characters who find a fertile spiritual home in their dramatic pursuits. The theatre becomes a place where women can escape the confines of motherhood and marriage and find a more meaningful sense of belonging and community. On the other hand, maternity can be a comforting respite from the overly narcissistic realm of the theatre. Most notably in novels by Marie-Claire Blais and Anne Hébert, the actress-mother points to a profound spiritual transformation among mothers. In accordance with traditional Québec's repressively conservative expectations of them, the mothers in these texts have all married and had children. As Québec moves into the modern era, however, they find the freedom to question these choices. This reformation allows the actress-mother to connect to a deeper sense of her purpose, to find spiritual meaning not in the Church but in her own personal experiences.

In the case of Flora Fontanges in *Le Premier jardin*, the actress-mother's creative identity must be lost before it is found. First dubbed "Pierrette Paul" by the orphanage in which she begins her childhood and "Marie Eventurel" by her adoptive parents, Flora returns to her birthplace after establishing a life and a career in France. Her return to Québec in mid-life is in part a search for a deeper identity than the one she has created for herself. Flora hopes to reunite with her daughter, Maud, and to discover her own real name and true identity. But instead of a simple search for roots, family, history, this is a profound spiritual journey through which Flora



hopes to unveil the mysteries of her own soul. Flora's journey is therefore primarily a spiritual quest, a search for her true identity beneath the layers of role-playing. It is only secondarily an artistic venture, a final stage in her acting career.

Having been pushed by her adoptive parents to accept the values of Catholic doctrine, the young Marie Eventurel's first rebellion takes the form of a decision to pursue a career in the theatre. This choice is especially significant given the social expectation of the time that women marry and have children: the hedonistic choice of a career in the theatre presented itself as one of the few alternatives for women, though the choice was seen as socially and spiritually unpalatable. Although the Eventurels "condemned her decision (to leave Québec and become an actress) as a collaboration with Satan" (Dufault 121), in reality this choice marked an important step in Marie's spiritual development. Through the characters that she will play throughout her adult life, Marie will discover those mystical aspects of herself that would otherwise have remained hidden.

Her departure from the Eventurel home marks her split with the path taken by so many Québécois women of the past (for example, the "filles du roi" that she evokes later in the novel, who travel to Québec with the sole hope of finding a husband). In rejecting the possibility of the traditional life of marriage and procreation, the young Flora quietly refuses the Catholic beliefs that define the Eventurel family. This rejection of her roots shapes not only Flora's psychological and emotional quest for self-definition, but also the way in which she views the world around her: her lack of belief in God and in the tenets of the Church leads her to doubt the superiority of human beings in the hierarchy of the natural world.

The first pages of *Le Premier jardin* show Flora preparing as much spiritually as mentally for her upcoming role as Winnie in *Oh! les beaux jours*. The scene resembles more closely a séance than a practiced preparation for a performance:

Elle se recroqueville sur la banquette...Pense au rôle de Winnie. Évite de penser à toute autre créature que Winnie. Est grosse de la petite figure fripée de Winnie. Se concentre. Appelle Winnie de toutes ses forces. Fait venir une très vieille femme en elle. La dévisage, l'observe, l'épie. Se confronte à elle. Essaie de lui ressembler. Convoque en elle et sur elle, à même son visage, tout ce qui est fragile, vulnérable, déjà abimé et passible de la peine de mort. (11)

Hébert's choice of words evoke a spiritual possession more than a mere preparation for an acting role. Her transformations are paranormal in nature, revealing the otherworldly nature of the theatrical craft. Her creativity allows her to seek and discover not only hidden aspects of her psyche but also buried parts of Québécois history, often relating to past generations of women. As she wanders with Raphaël, her daughter's boyfriend, she not only recalls the places and people of her own childhood but also experiences the history of Québec itself, and her memories allow her to delve into numerous identities. At one moment she channels a younger and less sophisticated version of herself, the next a character from Québécois history. Her desire for self-knowledge can only be achieved through a deeper knowledge of the history of women in her native province. She experiences the isolation of the first women of Québec with her theatrical imagination, and this visceral experience allows Flora to begin to understand her origins. In assuming the characters of numerous women of Old Québec she finishes by finding her old identity as Pierrette Paul, the young orphan girl resurfacing like a spirit that possesses Flora:

‘Pierrette Paul, c’est un joli nom, n’est-ce pas? C’est mon premier rôle, et je n’en suis jamais revenue.’ Elle glousse et elle penche la tête, regarde par en dessous, l’air sournois et coupable. Sa voix change, devient nasillarde et traînante, retrouve l’accent du pays. ‘Ne fais pas cette tête-là...c’est une pauvre petite créature, trotte-menu comme tout, une moucheronne qui apparaît de temps en temps dans ma tête et me dérange énormément’ (117)

Flora’s sudden transformation into her former self is portrayed as a demonic possession rather than as a conscious choice. This kind of theatrical play is the only real way for Flora to reconnect with her former identity as a young girl in Québec. The characters that inhabit her psyche are not only the many roles of her stage career, but also numerous women of French and Québécois history that speak to Flora’s need for a strong spiritual identity, even filling the void left by her lack of belief in God. This creative fertility renders her powerless against the characters that rise up and take control of her physical being, whether they be pieces of her own personal history or past generations of Québécois women. A new haircut inspires her to summon Joan of Arc, amazing her daughter’s friends who have gathered to welcome the renowned actress to Québec:

Jeanne en elle subit son procès et sa passion. Elle vient d’abjurer. Elle tremble. Sa voix n’est plus qu’un fil tendu qui se brise: - J’ai eu si peur d’être brûlée...Soudain, Flora Fontanges n’est plus maîtresse des sons, des odeurs, des images qui se bousculent en elle...Elle s’entend dire une seconde fois tout bas, mais si distinctement qu’on pourrait lire chaque mot sur ses lèvres: - J’ai eu si peur d’être brûlée... Elle passe la main sur son front pour y effacer Jeanne et l’épreuve du feu. Retrouve sa figure usée et sans éclat. Dit qu’elle veut rentrer.  
(31)

Any setting may become a stage for Flora, such as the bank of the Saint Lawrence where she invents the drama of Barbe Abbadie, beginning with nothing but a street name and the river that “ressemble à un décor de théâtre” (49). Her invocation of long-dead women such as this is not merely an exercise in imagination, but a way for Flora to find “un nom de femme à habiter”. It is important to note that this act of finding a name for herself may be read as a metaphor for a search for answers to the most profound questions of existence: “A woman’s spiritual quest...involves asking basic questions: Who am I? Why am I here? What is my place in the universe?” (Christ 329). The act of naming is itself a powerful one, whether one is naming oneself or something outside of oneself. This is particularly shown in Flora’s evocation of the name “Barbe Abadie”, the sky turns black and rain begins to fall. Flora’s calling forth of Barbe’s spirit evokes more mysterious powers from the suprnatural realm than all of her visits to old churches and ponderings on the existence of God.

The constant transformations that Flora undergoes leave her exhausted and without the energy to enjoy her much-needed solitude and relaxation; this double-edged sword of her creativity brings her both solace and unrest. A thorough reading reveals that Flora’s creative identity is essential to her spiritual self-discovery. She finds guidance in many of the characters that she embodies, not only in her childhood but as a woman of a certain age, begrudgingly pulled from retirement to play a role that has a spiritual lesson of its own for her, drawing her out “comme une plante que l’on sort de l’ombre et ramène vers le jour” (35). In the role of Winnie she finds the strength to face “sa propre vieillesse, en marche vers elle,” (35) for she is literally invaded by her theatrical roles, stripped of her identity and reinvented, a transformation best shown in her first meeting with the director of *Oh! les beaux jours*, a meeting that begins with

Flora's isolation on an empty stage and leads to the first stages of her spiritual transformation within the role of Winnie:

Isoler Flora Fontanges dans le vide. L'examiner sous toutes les coutures comme un microbe vivant sous le microscope. La saisir au moment de sa métamorphose, ce rôle qui doit l'envahir peu à peu... Elle fait appel à l'expérience de toute sa vie, chargée d'âge et d'illusions perdues. Elle a accès à ce qu'elle ne sait pas encore, qu'elle devine seulement dans les ténèbres du temps en marche. Flora Fontanges est déjà consommée dans l'éternité, toute livrée au rôle qui l'habite et la possède.

(45)

Flora's process of inhabiting her characters is not an intellectual but a spiritual one, as she literally becomes "possessed" by her roles. Thus when she has finished rehearsing and leaves the theatre, she is spiritually emptied of all the fullness accorded by Winnie: "Elle met de côté le rôle de Winnie.. A nouveau, elle n'est plus personne en particulier. Ni jeune ni vieille. Elle n'existe plus tout à fait" (49).

Despite the difficulty of finding a stable identity that is hers alone, Flora finds great spiritual richness in these transformations. Appropriating the traits of the "première femme" of Québec, Marie Rollet, Flora is in her element: "Elle est transfigurée, de la tête aux pieds. A la fois rajeunie et plus lourde. Chargée d'une mission mystérieuse. Elle est la mère du pays" (79). The transformation exhausts her, and in abandoning the character of Marie Rollet she again becomes "sans éclat comme quelqu'un qui reprend pied dans la vie de tous les jours... C'est une femme ordinaire qui se promène, au bras de son fils, dans les rues de la ville" (79). The lack of conscious choice on Flora's part in these transformations suggest a mystical, other-worldly spiritual "possession" rather than an act of intellect or will. Unlike the possessed states targeted

for exorcism by the Catholic Church, however, Flora's spiritual metamorphoses take her inward on a path of spiritual discovery.

Her easy metamorphoses into other women make Flora something of a "voleuse d'âmes," stealing the spiritual identities of others for lack of her own. Visiting the bedsides of dying people, she learns "à vivre et à mourir," appearing to covet these dying people the possession of a rich spirit that she would so like to have for herself:

Elle a tenu le petit miroir contre des bouches agonisantes, croyant voir passer  
l'âme dans une buée, désirant s'emparer de cette âme volatile pour s'en faire une  
vie de surcroît, désirant s'en servir, ce soir même, pour jouer *la Dame aux  
camélias*. (81)

It is this kind of "soul-stealing" that allows Flora to "réveiller une petite nonne" from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, "la maintenir vivante". This particular transformation puts her in contact with the God from whom she has long been estranged: "Mon Dieu...faites que je sois vivante, une fois de plus, que je voie avec mes yeux, que j'entende avec mes oreilles, que je souffre mille morts et mille plaisirs avec tout mon corps et toute mon âme, que je sois une autre à nouveau" (85). In going back in time and in a metaphorical sense bringing this nun back to life, Flora again enters the spiritual realm that has become her primary abode. Transformations like this one suggest a deep-seated fear on Flora's part "que son vrai visage surgisse et se montre devant elle... Ses cheveux en larges vagues retombant sur ses épaules, sa petite figure d'avant les masques de théâtre, dure comme la pierre" (90). Her many borrowed identities are perhaps, then, all ways of avoiding the most frightening face of all: her own.

Without the comforting refuge of a solid faith in her former religion and fearing "ni Dieu ni diable" (68), Flora exemplifies the post-1960 Québécois woman for whom self-discovery can

no longer occur in the confines of the Church but must instead come from a more internal spiritual search. The ringing church bells that follow her through Québec and the edifices that surround her only serve to magnify Flora's lack of religious faith. Despite her doubts in the validity of the institution, however, the many signs of the Catholic Church bring back a nostalgic remembrance of her past belief:

Raphaël ne peut qu'énumérer des noms d'églises au passage, comme s'il désignait des vieilles mortes, effacées dans l'éblouissement du soleil. Tandis que Flora Fontanges se demande s'il y a encore quelqu'un, dans chacune de ces églises, qui répond au nom de Dieu? Il y eut un temps où Dieu se commettait sans vergogne derrière les façades de pierre grise. C'était un temps de certitude. Dès le portail ouvert, on savait à quoi s'en tenir...on savait tout de suite que le buisson ardent existait, enfermé dans le tabernacle. Dieu se tenait là, il se cachait, par pitié pour nous, à cause de l'éclat insoutenable de sa face. (41)

Despite the fact that she feels the loss of her formerly comforting religion, Flora's creative spirit thrives when she leaves (both geographically and psychologically) the oppressive atmosphere of her youth. Leaving the Church and Québec allows Flora to free herself from the expectation to marry, have children, and lead a generally cloistered and private life. Instead, the life that Flora chooses is a public one, dependent on public approval and leaving her open to both praise and malice from critics. It is, in fact, a particularly bad review of a performance that pushes Flora to at last turn away from blissful maternity and reclaim her vitality on the stage: "Alors même qu'elle est pleine d'allégresse au sujet de sa petite enfant, à peine née, elle fera surgir sur la scène, dans toute sa détresse, la Fantine des Misérables qui est dépossédée de sa fille

et de toute raison d'être au monde" (112). The maternal is perhaps the only role for which Flora has ever been truly unprepared.

Long before her role as mother, the young Pierrette Paul was horrified at the thought of being stuck in her own skin, unable to escape herself for the remainder of her existence: "N'être que soi toute la vie, sans jamais pouvoir changer, être Pierrette Paul toujours, sans s'échapper jamais, enfermée dans la même peau" (63). This idea leaves her feeling paralyzed, literally unable to move. Even before experiencing the responsibility and social restrictions of motherhood, the young girl is aware of being trapped, restricted by her time and surroundings to a role that leaves little freedom for creative experience. As an adult, Flora deals with her fear of being trapped by constantly escaping to other times and places in her mind, her imagination acting as a kind of magic carpet that allows her to discover new people and identities.

Flora is reminded of these long-lost attachments when she revisits her former adoptive parents' home, the same parents who tried to make "a vraie dame" of her. Being a "vraie dame" did not include a career in the theatre, which is considered in this high society family to be "une invention du diable, indigne d'une fille de la bonne société" (162).

Her love of theatre being the first sign that she would not meet the expectations of her adopted family, Marie's rupture with "Les Eventurel" becomes final upon her refusal of an offer of marriage to a respectable candidate. This significant choice amounts to a rejection of Marie's final invitation to join the ranks of traditional Catholic Québécois women. The budding actress prefers to shoulder the Eventurels' condemnation rather than squelch her creativity and submit to a set of rules that do not fit her. If, as Roseanne Dufault writes, "[F]or Flora, life *is* art; the professional and the personal are one and the same" (129), then it is at this very moment in the text that Flora is called upon to choose either her lifelong passion for acting or her new-found



love for motherhood. Her role as mother must take a back seat as theatrical roles demand more and more of her time; Flora's awareness of her failure to fill the role of the all-sacrificing mother (68) is well compensated by her great success on the stage and a sense of fulfillment as she nears the end of her theatrical career (Dufault 129). Though frustrated in her relationships with other people—namely her daughter and the rare men in her life—Flora is frequently rewarded by the profundity and complexity of her own psyche, which she continues to discover even in her advancing years.

Whereas Hébert's actress-mothers are torn in their decision to place their career above their obligation to their children, the mothers in Marie-Claire Blais' texts are clearly ambivalent even in their desire for close relationships with their children. This may be explained by the fact that Hébert, although writing well into the post-Quiet Revolution period, lived much of her life before the contestation of Catholic values and was herself a devout Catholic for much of her life. In her works we can sense the vestiges of those values, even if Hébert often questions and criticizes those elements that negatively affect women. Marie-Claire Blais' texts *L'Ange de la Solitude* and *Tête Blanche* provide examples of the actress-mother who has deeper attachments to her craft than to her maternal instincts, virtually abandoning the maternal part of her psyche in favor of moments in the spotlight.

In *Tête Blanche* Blais presents a mother whose acting career takes precedence over her maternal duties; in sending "Tête Blanche" to live at a boarding school, "Mère" gives up a role in her son's life in favor of the many roles that she represents on the stage as an acclaimed actress. Doting and tender in her treatment of her son, this mother figure nonetheless "se donnait plus à son art qu'à son mari et encore moins à Tête Blanche" (12). The actress-mother's promised visits never materialize and her long letters never arrive, making manifest the actress's lack of

identification with the maternal role; spiritual fulfillment is found instead in the process of acting and in the recognition of her celebrity. The emotionally imprisoned child experiences what little validation he receives through his mother's performances: "Apprenez, cher Monsieur, que l'on a beaucoup applaudi votre maman, hier soir" writes "Mère" in response to a letter from Tête Blanche in which he questions the purpose of his existence (36). The placement of this response suggests that it is the child, not the mother, who is relative in this relationship. Tête Blanche's dependence on his mother's celebrity for identity goes against the traditional image of the mother whose identity is dependent on her child.

In discovering her identity in the dramatic arts, "Mère" discovers a way of exploring her spiritual essence without the trappings of religion. Like Hébert's Flora Fontanges, she experiences the theatre with a mystical pleasure akin to religious rapture:

Cette merveilleuse sensation de jouer pour la première fois...J'ai toujours pensé que je cesserais d'avoir peur; mais chaque fois, j'ai frémi devant ce public qui attendait. On souffre de se séparer de ses frères comédiens; il existe quelque chose de sacré entre nous. (66)

It is significant that when "Mère" receives a visit on her deathbed, it is a friend announcing a new performance of their acting troupe: *Le Dieu Nouveau*. The place of the theatre in the life of Tête Blanche's mother is, after all, like a "new God" taking the place of the old. In wondering himself why the Catholic masses are sad, Tête Blanche imagines his mother would have likened the experience to that of the theatre: "Elle m'aurait peut-être dit: 'La religion est un peu comme le théâtre. On pleure et on aime'" (80). The mother's apathetic regard for religion contradicts the traditional image of Québécois mothers, who had long been the protectors and sustainers of religious faith. "Tête Blanche" represents the first generation of Québécois children whose

mothers have refused to be keepers of the faith, instead fulfilling personal dreams and leaving their children to discover a sense of the divine on their own. Fervent faith is replaced by a fervent desire for all that is dramatic and theatrical, the ecclesiastic theatrics of the church are replaced by the secular theatrics of the stage. Blais' mother finds in her co-actors the values that women historically sought in the Church, as shown in the above passage. The mother's expression of her sadness at being separated from the theatre is much more sincere than any sadness that she expresses over the absence of her son, who appears to be an afterthought in her hectic life.

The death of the mother in *Tête Blanche* may be considered symbolically as well, for the all-importance of the mother in the traditional novel of Québec has disappeared, making way for a more complete image of both women and men. As the mother cannot truly discover her spiritual identity without breaking free of her maternal identity and exploring her own creativity, the child cannot come into his or her own until he no longer looks to his mother for an identity. In losing his mother, *Tête Blanche* loses that which has defined him in her absence. *Tête Blanche* is now free to seek an identity of his own that does not depend upon his mother's creative aspirations.

Marie-Claire Blais repeats the theme of the negligent actress-mother in *L'Ange de la solitude*, a novel written twenty-nine years after *Tête Blanche*. Sophie experiences her daughter, Doudouline, as a burden to her luxurious lifestyle. In opposition to the Catholic model of the all-sacrificing mother figure, Sophie finds it difficult to allow her daughter even partial access to her glamorous existence, going so far as to lock her silver cabinet when Doudouline and her girlfriend come to visit:

Doudouline et Polydor chambardaient le paisible paysage de Sophie...Sophie veillait à ce qu'elles n'envahissent pas son chalet, car elles dérangent tout,

disait-elle, ses cuillères, ses fourchettes d'argent, jusqu'à ses crèmes de maquillage qu'on lui vidait. (79)

Having discovered an identity in her theatrical existence, Sophie seems torn in her attachment to her daughter. This conflicted relationship goes both ways, as the actress-mother's child can no longer see the mother as a haven for life's hardships and a source of unconditional love. In Doudouline's eyes Sophie is "plus qu'une mère...une déesse," (30) a significant choice of words as Sophie has valued the pursuit of artistic talent above her maternal obligations, finding the label of mother far inferior to the goddess-like status of actress. She holds her daughter always at a distance, despite the maternal guilt that plagues her. Sophie finds her own intolerance of her daughter's presence "une injustice, une anomalie" (79) but is incapable of welcoming her daughter into her life. Her career instead receives the lion's share of her attention, as she rises early to memorize lines and obsess over her lack of understanding of the Strindberg play that she is rehearsing.

Despite her intense irritation at the invasion of her privacy by her daughter, Sophie is able to support her daughter's creative aspirations, though Doudouline appears unprepared. Sophie's willingness to offer financial support for Doudouline's budding rock band is tempered, however, with overt impatience with Doudouline's lack of practical *savoir-faire*: "C'est ça, tu comptes encore sur moi pour les trouver, et l'éclairage, la régie technique, tu y as pensé aussi?" (102). In her high expectations for Doudouline, Sophie appears to forget that before finding success in her own career she had been obliged to live and work, with her young daughter in tow, in a commune where she barely had enough money to pay for minimal necessities. Her hypercritical view of her daughter appears to spring from unresolved doubt concerning her own life choices. Despite her success in her creative life Sophie is discontent and alone, unsure of how to create

closer relationships with those around her. She prefers the attention of the theatre community to that of her daughter, feeling more at-home in her role as *Phèdre* than in her role as mother to Doudouline. Sophie seems never to have given herself entirely to the maternal role, resisting the undeniable fact of her maternity until the last possible minute: she ultimately goes into labor while performing the role of “Phèdre”. Sophie and Doudouline walk a thin line between love and hate, especially when it comes to discussion of Doudouline’s creative aspirations: “Comment une mère et une fille artistes, comment ce couple d’un individualisme excessif pouvait-il coexister?” (102). This individualistic drive led Sophie to become an aspiring actress who would sacrifice all she possessed, even the well-being of her daughter, for her dramatic pursuits. It is in fact such “excessive individualism” that has brought about notable changes in these post-*Quiet Revolution* texts, and that has allowed for the creation of women characters who seek a social and a spiritual identity that is more in harmony with their actual experience than that of wife / mother / daughter.

The mother figure in *L’Ange de la Solitude* is ambivalent in her attachment to her daughter, questioning her fulfilling of the maternal imperative that has her tied eternally to the irresponsible, imposing Doudouline. Sophie would in fact have preferred a life much like the one that her daughter leads: independent, unattached, and free to explore her artistic whims without maternal obligations dragging her down. Instead she pushes her daughter away in order to feel free from her dependence, relishing her time alone. Caught between the old generation and the new generation of women, Sophie is not entirely convinced that her choice to be a mother was worth the sacrifice—even temporary—of her career. Her individualism is not compatible with the necessary sacrifices of motherhood or marriage.

This individualistic tone is even more evident in Louky Bersianik's *L'Euguelionne*, where the extra-terrestrial title character pursues her mission of finding "le mâle de son espèce" while encouraging the women of Québec to rally against the patriarchal forces that have historically defined them. In depicting the importance of creative expression for all women, Bersianik attempts to undo the objectification that leaves women outside of the creative sphere; the frequent emphasis on the body (even in some feminist authors) may be detrimental to the worldview of women's creativity:

The historical record makes it clear that there has been a persistent focus on the female body in all attempts to understand women as creative, which has led the female to be seen as the subject of creative efforts by men, rather than the agent of creativity herself...It has been the exceptional woman—creative, supported, and driven—who has succeeded in creating art works that have endured and entered the canon. (Hoeveler xi)

Bersianik confronts the difficulty of women's creativity within the Church when she mocks Victor Hugo's contention that "l'homme seul, sur la terre, est du sexe de Dieu" (*L'Euguelionne* 238), a contention that neatly excludes women from the possibility of great creation. Only men, suggests Bersianik, are gifted with the power of creation in this institution. Her satire of the Sermon on the Mount sarcastically venerates those creatures born with a phallus: not only are they capable of creation, they are creative energy itself (*L'Euguelionne* 218-220). Bersianik ridicules this notion of men as the sole possessors of creative potential, describing the ways in which patriarchal society's limited vision is itself to blame if women have historically lacked success in the artistic sphere:

[V]ous avez essayé de convaincre les femmes de votre espèce qu'elles n'avaient pas de génie, qu'elles ne pouvaient pas en avoir, car il s'agissait pour elles de se soumettre à la nature, à leurs dépens et à votre profit. Tous les moyens étaient bons dans cette entreprise, depuis la force musculaire jusqu'au chantage sentimental. Et vous avez été si impérieux, si impératifs et si ironiques, qu'elles ont fini par vous croire, qu'elles ont fini par comprendre que ce n'était pas du tout dans leur intérêt d'avoir du génie. Et elles n'en ont pas eu. (255)

Pointing to women's formerly accepted role as mere "useful objects" in Québécois society as keeping women from blossoming artistically, Bersianik asks: "Pourquoi voudriez-vous que vos ménagères aient du génie?" (254). She provides an example of this in her depiction of three "Pédaleuses"—the oppressed species of L'Euguélienne's planet of origin—who live "au fond d'un puits de mélasse," and who despite their best efforts are incapable of creating anything that does not resemble the substance of their daily existence, molasses. How can modern society, Bersianik asks, expect women to be creative with equal aplomb when they have been denied those very resources that would encourage their talents and foster creative genius? The disdain of the male "Législateurs" ignores the habitual lack of support with which creative women are confronted:

Elles n'ont vraiment aucun talent! Regardez-les! Ne sont-elles pas ridicules? Elles veulent nous imiter et faire des chefs-d'œuvre et tout ce qu'elles trouvent à faire, c'est dessiner de la mélasse! ...Elles auront beau faire, elles n'arriveront jamais à faire des chefs-d'œuvre, jamais elles n'arriveront à nous égaler. (30)

Especially strong in Bersianik's text is the symbol of the painted canvas, such as the one that she discovers in the dining room of the downtrodden Omicronne. Whereas Omicronne maintains a

pleasant face to the outside world, the disturbing painting that she has created is a more truthful reflection of the artist's tormented spirit: "Cette toile vous prenait aux tripes et dérangeait littéralement l'acte de se nourrir à table... Cette toile était un cri de révolte. L'auteur avait un talent fou, mais désordonné, un talent qui avait l'air de se nier lui-même avec rage, qui cherchait à se détruire" (82). Having defined herself in relation to her husband and children, Omicronne's creativity is chaotic and unstructured, reflecting the inner turmoil that she experiences as she attempts to suppress this impulse that interferes with her "other" life as servant to her husband and children. Lacking a receptive venue for her work, Omicronne must display her creations in the most hostile of environments: her own home. Omicronne's husband's derision of her work echoes Québec's attitude towards its wives and mothers: "Ça? Ah, ce n'est rien! Ne faites pas attention. C'est ma femme qui s'amuse comme ça à temps perdu. Je lui avais dit souvent que ce brouillon n'avait pas sa place dans la salle à manger" (82). Omicronne's husband gives voice to the masculine element that denigrates women's creative instincts by mocking their efforts to create anything outside of the kitchen. Omicronne's surprising artistic creations evidence her desire to distance herself from her servile identity within her family.

The dismissive attitude towards Omicronne's creativity points to the historical denial of any real possibility of creative genius in women. If the creative impulse is only recently evident in Québécois texts it is undoubtedly a direct result of the fact that, as Bersianik writes, "Le critère du génie est sa misogynie!" (252), despite the fact that "toutes les œuvres d'art et de littérature, toutes les œuvres Humaines ont été faites aux dépens d'une mère, d'une sœur, d'une épouse, d'une maîtresse, d'une domestique, d'une muse, d'une égérie" (253). Despite this exploitation of women's support, it is men, Bersianik writes, who choose to see themselves as tortured artists, "les Mozarts assassinés" (257).



The act of writing appears in these texts as a way in which women recreate their existence beyond the physical realm. Writing allows them to gain access to the spiritual realm, which—while not necessarily including a notion of God—leads these women to a more profound understanding of their own identity:

Writing, whether it is by women who have never written or women who write every day, is an act of affirmation. Whatever she chooses to write about, a woman is, in a very real sense, writing her self. As is any writer. Creativity is living with a higher consciousness, seeing the deeper meaning in acts of everyday life. In art, everything is possible. In this way, through art, women can at once affirm the significance of their daily lives and transcend the limits of reality. (Elder xxi)

This connection between the physical act of writing and the spiritual transformation therein appears in the first chapter of Bersianik's *Le Pique-nique sur l'Acropole*:

Écrire est une expression corporelle. La main corporelle s'y hisse sollicitée, corps minime mais entier. Articulé, réseaux de nerfs et de muscles, main d'oeuvre en mouvement, pronation, supination. Une seule main parmi des milliers et quelques doigts tenant au corps. (28)

Much in the way that the female body has been separated from women's spiritual lives in decades and centuries past, the writing hand in this passage is disembodied from the creative force behind it. Slowly, however, Bersianik pans back to emphasize that the writing hand works in harmony with the rest of the body to accomplish the creative act: "Les doigts tiennent au corps qui tiennent à la plume et lui fait courir le marathon entre les pages du cahier. Drôle de course à pieds qui est une course à bras raccourci et à bâtons rompus" (29). Bersianik's hand is not a mere instrument by which inspiration is transmitted, it is one essential element of the writing machine

by which the woman's self is written. This emphasis on the physical side of creativity is the point of departure of Bersianik's text *Le Pique-Nique sur l'Acropole*, as noted by Karen Gould in her critical text *Writing in the Feminine*: In the opening pages of *Le Pique-Nique*, we are immediately alerted to the existence of a hand, arm, shoulder that move irregularly and with some tension so that a woman's words may be inscribed on the space of an empty page. More than anything else, however, the woman writer's initial presence in this text is conveyed through the sense of touch: her hand touches the paper, touches the source of her own physical pleasure, introduces the theme of the untouched women (the caryatids), and seeks the arousal of these ancient Greek statues from their patriarchal sleep through the aid of another woman's touch (193).

The act of writing brings forth a long-awaited sense of belonging for these women. As in drawing and painting, the act of writing is a physical as well as a mental and psychological act. It allows these women characters to experience their physicality. Their bodies were shamed by the Catholic Church, seen as the root of evil and the cause of men's sin, especially in terms of the blood that they shed every month (Ranke-Heinemann 22). The creative act takes on symbolic importance for Bersianik, for it allows women to visualize the revolutionary changes for which they are striving: "Écrire c'est enjamber les murs, enjamber des morts, des mers, des siècles, c'est écraser le marbre statuaire...Écrire qu'on enjambe l'Acropole, c'est aussi faire danser les doigts de sa main" (*Pique-nique* 79). Bersianik refuses the Christian hierarchy of mind and spirit over body, instead showing the importance of integrating the body into the activities that are normally considered to be cerebral or spiritual.

This situating of the body as central to all creative acts opposes the traditional view of the body as the seat of evil. The glorification of the "pure" mind above the "impure" body is

nullified in these texts that present the entire body, together with the mind and spirit, as the source of creative inspiration. The physical side of creative work is depicted in Jovette Marchessault's *Comme une enfant de la terre*, as the grandmother of this matriarchal trinity finds a source of physical and spiritual pleasure even as she draws the most mundane of images:

Elle dessinait dans un élan total du cœur, de l'esprit, de l'âme, du corps. Et cet élan se prolongeait dans tous les muscles plats qui se meuvent dans la graisse, juste sous la peau: et dans son épaule, son bras, son sang, ses artères, ses nerfs, ses doigts courts et spatulés. (252)

“Grand-mère” models a healthy example of sensual, spiritual creativity for the narrator, like the narrator of *Comme une enfant de la terre* for whom “all the universe is mythical, and she herself is sensually centred in all things” (Vautier 159-61). Grand-mère's teaching goes beyond her rustic drawings of farm animals: a pianist at the local movie theater, Grand-mère's enjoyment of her art exhibits passion not only for the drama of the cinema but also for her own creativity, brought out in the following quote as she interprets Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*: “Grand-mère...rejette les partitions imposées et invente une musique pour accompagner le mouvement de la roue. Sa musique est belle, juste, assez aigrelette, émouvante. Elle souligne chaque soupir angoissé, chaque lamentation muette” (301). The carnal pleasure that the grandmother experiences both in her music and as she draws is passed to the granddaughter, who finds much the same mystical transport as she chronicles her voyage. The narrator's description of the necessity of her creative activity reads like an apocalyptic text, fervent and passionately emotional:

Je suis le Scribe ! ...J'invente. Je transcris. Je dénature et j'altère...Dans un mouvement hélicoïdal je saisis la pelure des mots ; je les mets à nu et je les

éventre (135) ...Avec cette main glorieuse j'écris avant que le cancer du doute et de la résignation ne dévore l'organe créateur, ne lui colle une étiquette de prix. Si un jour je cessais de m'écrire, de me peindre, la main glorieuse tomberait de mon corps comme une feuille morte. (137)

This reverence for the body, for the physical act of creation, encompasses the rich theme of sexuality that we see in the literature of this era. It is not, however, limited to sexuality.

Women's bodies—their hands, feet, arms—are revealed as creative in their own right, rather than mere objects of masculine creation.

Even as it becomes more common to see women writers, painters, and performers, the appearance of a woman filmmaker is still something of a rare occurrence. In incorporating Alice Guy—the first woman filmmaker—into the narrative of *Comme une enfant de la terre*, Jovette Marchessault affirms the importance of reclaiming creative roles for women. Guy's movies, writes Marchessault, are distinctly different from those of her masculine contemporaries: “des coups de cymbales qui peuvent vous étendre raide: raide morte de rire, raide morte d'émotions” (316). But Guy's genius was not fully welcomed in the society of the 1920's, where “il n'y a plus de place pour des risque-tout de son espèce, surtout quand ils sont de sexe féminin” (321). Her films, so daring and influential at one time, were soon forgotten or attributed to other filmmakers. The fate of the creative female spirit, Marchessault seems to suggest, is not necessarily critical acclaim or even acceptance or notoriety. For women like Alice Guy, however, this uphill journey is preferable to the alternative of adherence to the social status quo. In fact, it is perhaps the difficulty of the creative journey for women that makes it such a fertile ground for spiritual growth.

Marie-Claire Blais' *L'Ange de la solitude* presents the possibility of creativity as the impetus for the unification of women in a society where women had previously been isolated, separated from each other by duties to family and husband. The gynocentric community of Abeille's atelier allows the "filles" to unite in a common purpose while rejecting blind adherence to any prescriptive set of values. Their communal home is a magical and safe haven that appears to protect them from the pain of the outside world. In reality, however, this creative community of women is far from blissful. The overwhelming individuality of this artistic environment invites discord in their relationships with one another, whether between lovers, friends, or mother and daughter. "The artists [of *L'Ange de la solitude*] suffer from a lethargic depression that hinders their ability to work effectively...melancholy is portrayed as oppressive and as an inhibition to free creativity" (Wacker 110).

The "atelier," as they call their communal home, is the site of the young women's chaotic, sometimes self-destructive rebellion. The "filles" are exploring far more than their artistic impulses; they willfully live on the margins of society, seeking self-awareness through experimentation with life and art. They throw themselves into new and sometimes perilous situations: adventures not only in art but also in sex and drugs, all seeming to point to the hope of finding purpose, meaning, and identity. It is clear that, by way of their sporadic creative work, "les filles" seek a source of inspiration and creativity that is greater than they, hoping for unity with whatever divinity they might find in the thrilling mystical experiences of their artistic endeavors (Ingman 97). The loss of the spiritual outlet of religion and church (and the rejection of liberal women from that domain) has necessitated the creation of new avenues for mystical experience, and in the case of these artistically-driven young women this experience takes the form of experimental music and performance, self-expression through the written word and

through painting, and also through drug-induced nights at the dance club and the ensuing sexual experimentation. The latter two may not easily fit with the other more socially acceptable forms of creative expression, but in fact they appear to stem from the same place of desire for these girls. L'Abeille is only somewhat committed to her artistic endeavors, but her need to live a life unfettered by traditional constraints is fully manifested in her promiscuous sexuality and all-out partying night after night at her favorite nightclub.

Writers, painters, musicians, performers, the women living with l'Abeille all seek their creative identity in different places. For each "fille", her art is not only a "métier" but also a way of defining herself, and a way of creating the woman that she hopes to become. Unlike Sophie, who grew up during a time when a woman who chose her career over her family was an anomaly, Doudouline's desire for creative expression is not in opposition to any other element of her life. Doudouline follows only partially in her mother's footsteps as a performer, writing and performing an "opéra rock". Although she fumbles in her efforts at a successful musical career, Doudouline lives fully the bohemian, rebellious life of the artist. Liberated more fully than Sophie from the societal values of 1950's Québec, Doudouline and her community of girlfriends are free to find their place in society through whatever means necessary. Isolated in the home that they have created as an artist's sanctuary, these six young women are all entirely submerged in the quest for spiritual identity through creative endeavors. Each woman falters along the way yet continuously struggles to find her voice; Johnie must take a break from the commune to find the "courage" to write. L'Abeille is more invested in her romantic adventures than in her painting, accused by Doudouline of leaving unfinished not only paintings but drawing classes as well. But the goal of their searching, after all, is not artistic perfection or fame as much as personal discovery through the process of artistic creation.

L'Abeille's sometime lover and artistic mentor, Paula, excuses her self-destructive smoking habit as a manner of avoiding old age: "On ne peut pas vivre éternellement, et je n'aime pas la vieillesse" (58). For her, art is a form of vengeance for an unpleasantly awkward childhood. That her artistic creations take place in the same feverish atmosphere as her varied romantic trysts serves to emphasize the lack of separation between the two aspects of her life. The same feverish restlessness that fuels her promiscuous sexual rituals also pushes her to transform the empty or incomplete canvases that fill her studio. The bohemian lifestyle, late-night parties, addiction and painful relationships inspire "les filles" in their artistic outpourings. It would be a mistake, however, to see the combination of addictions, promiscuity and artistic inspiration as a sanction of illicit behavior. These texts propose an earnest search for individualism as necessarily associated with an exploration of many forbidden experiences: for the women in these texts the forbidden areas of life are also the previously "masculine" life of the artist, the preference of an artistic career over maternity, and the courageous selfishness of those choices. "Les filles" are free to discover themselves as they desire, free also to self-destruct, as does Gérard in the end; the latter fulfills her destiny to be a "Christ figure with alchemical allusions whose death shatters the artists' melancholic state" (Wacker 110). In the wake of Gérard's death, the artists are inspired to use their creativity to heal from the tragic loss. Gérard's spirit sustains her friends and supports them in their creative aspirations, appearing to each of them in turn at an important moment in their creative lives: Gérard's ghost quietly applauds Doudouline's success at the premiere of her rock opera, and when Gérard appears to her in her studio, l'Abeille is at last inspired to finish her paintings:

[E]t Gérard était encore debout, un doigt sur les lèvres boudeuses devant les stores qui n'avaient pas été ouvertes depuis plusieurs mois, les stores qui

désormais seraient toujours clos. Et chassez-moi toute cette fumée, ouvrez la fenêtre! dit l'Abeille, je veux peindre, le ciel, les arbres, les feuilles, ce qu'il en reste avant l'hiver. (145)

The criticizing voice in *L'Ange de la solitude* comes only from their own psyches, inner critics informed by long-standing societal rules and standards. When this voice is at last silenced—in this case through the trauma of Gérard's death—the women are free to create. Only by breaking free of mockery and criticism, whether it comes from the artist herself or from dismissive and condescending males (as in *L'Euguélionne*), can the artist assert her creative identity and thereby get in touch with the divine creative force inside herself. The creative passions reflected in so many female literary characters of post-1960 Québec appears as a medium through which women seek their deepest and truest identities, as an appropriate expression of love, and also as a way to cope with loss and sadness. It is not always a replacement for religion, but acts nonetheless in a similar capacity in terms of providing inspiration and comfort. These forms of creative expression, however fulfilling in many instances, can also be a source of psychic pain for these women characters. As they free themselves from the cloistered existence of their foremothers and venture into creative realms, Québécois women are faced with questions that sometimes make their lives more complicated, not less. They must choose to accept or reject the ramifications of a life lived outside the boundaries of those traditional expectations, taking upon themselves the difficulty of creating a life that does not necessarily fit the expected mold. In seeking a fuller life through these artistic endeavors, women sometimes find peace and fulfillment, but other times are challenged to grow in ways that are not necessarily comfortable. What they always find, however, is the possibility



to find a deeper sense of their connection with the divine, whether this divinity be seen as within or outside of themselves.

### **Chapter 3**

#### **Sexuality**

It is no secret that human sexuality has long been at odds with the teachings of the Catholic Church, for that matter with all Christian traditions: “What does it take to get into heaven? It is hard to say for sure. Good behavior will certainly improve our chances. If there is one thing that will ruin them, it is sex” (Portman xi). Powerful and therefore dangerous, the domain of sexuality is at the center of many of the main controversial issues within the Church (homosexuality, abortion, divorce) and is yet surprisingly absent from many official texts produced by the Church. When one scans numerous transcripts of papal documents, including the 1045-page *The Church and the Bible*, there is no overt mention of sex. The exclusion of sexuality from most official Church discourse—despite its inflexible stance in regards to sexual issues—eerily parallels the exclusion of women from any important role in the Church, and this is no mere coincidence: the Church’s most powerful leaders have long been of the opinion that “women represent the fall of the immortal soul under the sway of the mortal body, causing sin and death” (Ruether 30). Yet despite the Church’s apparent desire to sweep human sexuality under the rug, it is clear that—even in the most oppressed stages of Christianity—an awareness of the profundity of this domain has been present. It is no accident that the authors of the Bible used the verb “to know” as a euphemism for sexual contact. The most intimate of intercourses is one of the most profound ways to truly know another person, or oneself.

Rejected from any significant involvement in the Church—the continued power of which was nonetheless seen as one of their three main purposes according to Augustine (Ranke-Heinemann 88)—and branded with the evil of their sexual nature, it stands to reason that this

rejected part of themselves would eventually assert itself and demand validation. This is exactly what we see in these texts, as women turn to sexual experience not only for physical but also for metaphysical pleasure. Now used as a tool to combine physical reality with the search for meaning and connection with the divine, sexuality leads the women in these texts to transcend oppressions not by reaching to heaven, but by delving deeper into themselves. After a discussion of the background of women's sexuality in the Québécois world, I will show how eight Québécois texts written by women illustrate the evolution of women's sexuality as a means of spiritual fulfillment. While the term "spiritual" best fits the existential experiences of the characters in these texts, it does not necessarily indicate the intervention of a higher power or "God"; it is often a more internal, psychic revelation on the part of the character.

Exploited for many centuries as a commodity, women's sexuality has not often truly belonged to women. This is especially true in societies where Catholicism is the major religion, as many of the important texts of the Church not only dismiss women's sexuality but also see it as the work of the devil. As the Quiet Revolution represented a break with the values of the Catholic Church, the question of sexuality became one of the most important and significant questions resulting from this cultural and social upheaval. Faced with the challenge of reinventing the domain of sexuality, women writers in post-Quiet Revolution Québec begin to show this previously taboo area of sexuality as presenting great possibilities for existential self-knowledge and spiritual growth. Returning from its traditional place of repression, sexuality comes to light as the seat of what is most essential and sacred in life. This use of sexuality as a sacred tool goes directly against the traditional views of the Church on sexuality.

Sexuality wears many masks in these texts, and not all of them are the pleasant masks of life and love. Many characters venture into the frightening and unpredictable side of women's

sexuality, as this appears to be a necessary step in its validation in the psyche. This darkness evokes ancient associations between sexuality and death, which were an inevitable balance to the more palatable associations of prosperity, fertility, birth and rebirth (Lerner 159). Four texts by Anne Hébert—*Kamouraska*, *Les Enfants du Sabbat*, *Les Fous de Bassan*, and *L'Enfant chargé de songes*—present this sinister side of sexuality, highlighting its inherent power and women's difficulties in integrating this sexuality into their daily lives. Despite the difficulty (and impossibility, for some) of realizing sexual liberation, the model of sexual power that is presented in these texts is indispensable to the treatment of women's sexuality in the Québécois text. There are texts, as Cixous writes, “avec des sexes de femmes” (40); along with other feminist writers like Monique Wittig, Cixous insists that the only way for women to find their way out of the oppressed position in which they find themselves is to relate—in their writing as in their sex lives—to other women.

Associated since the birth of Christianity with evil, women's sexuality was overwhelmingly rejected and vilified by the Church. Since the opposition of male (which is good) with the female gender (that which is evil, because tempting in her sexuality) was born long before Christianity, we cannot attribute only to the Christian religion the struggle between male and female in a battle of good and evil. Augustine's declaration that women, while having a soul eligible for redemption, are in body evil and are in fact “created subordinate to man for the purpose of sex and procreation” (Ruether 4) found surprising agreement in the Catholic Church, and this idea has been passed on through generations. Even Hildegard of Bingen refers to her own era as a “womanish time” (lacking in virtue and bent toward sin) and believed that “the biological complementarity of the male as the sower of the seed and the women as nurturer of it dictates a hierarchical social order that demands that women as wives obey their husbands”

(Ruether 85). Her views of this hierarchy imposed by biology led Hildegard—along with countless other nuns—to take the veil, preferring celibacy over marriage or motherhood.

The equating of women with the body (and thus sex), and the sex with procreation, “led quickly to the situation where women were seen to be of worth only by virtue of their role in procreation” (Jordan 2). Yet despite her importance in the arena of procreation, woman is seen only as a vessel for the male seed: in addition to allowing the supposedly physically and emotionally weaker woman “a smaller sphere of freedom, self-determination, and social leadership than is allotted to men,” Pope John Paul only recognized the divine role of procreation in men (Cahill 261). The Church has also done little to change the view that pleasure in sex is unacceptable to God, asserting simply that “sex should be properly oriented toward procreation” (Gallagher 231), and has continued to promote the biological determinism that feminists like Monique Wittig—who encourages her readers to consider that the category of “woman” is political, not biological—find odious (Wittig 359).

As it has long considered lustful desire a “feminine” fault, the Church’s rejection of the physical pleasure of the body is tantamount to rejection of the entire female gender. Condemning any sexual relationship that does not have reproduction as its unique goal, the Catholic Church has consistently held that sexual desire “has not been conceived of as something that is intrinsically good, not even as that which, quite apart from any consideration of procreation, cements the bond between a man and a woman... Sexual intercourse has been understood to exist for the purpose of procreation” (Hampson 189). This consecration of reproduction is especially significant in Québécois culture, where population crises have been the catalyst for political and religious campaigns encouraging procreation. It is therefore not only religious traditions but also specifically Québécois political agendas, many of which reflect the “Revanche

des berceaux” of earlier eras that endorsed the maternal role at the expense of women’s sexual identity. This simultaneous deification and annihilation of the female body catches women in a double bind that forces them to deny their bodies and sexual desires. According to the values of the Church, the woman is to forego physical pleasure and revel only in the “pure” pleasure of motherhood. The importance of sexual purity, represented by the intact hymen, is shown in the long-standing efforts of the Church to prove that Mary was a virgin not only before giving birth but even *after* giving birth to Jesus. It is thus that we are refused access to the Divine Mother’s sexual organs, the sexuality of the breast blanché by the infant’s need for nourishment, the reproductive organs diminished before the importance of the ear that hears the pronouncement of the angel:

Du corps virginal nous n’aurons droit qu’à l’oreille, aux larmes et aux seins. Que l’organe sexuel féminin se soit transformé en cette innocente coquille réceptacle du son, peut éventuellement contribuer à érotiser l’écoute, la voix, voire l’entendement: mais elle rabaisse surtout la sexualité au rang de sous-entendu.  
(Kristeva 40)

This emphasis on purity demands more than physical virginity, it also demands psychological submission to the masculine figure. This submission is played out in the *roman de la terre* novels of early Québec, *Maria Chapdelaine* being one of the best known. Maria is a virtuous young woman who subordinates her wishes, first to her father and then to her future husband, even when overcome with grief and sadness over the loss of her true love. Her duty to patriarchal law is unquestioning, and there is no hint of sexuality in her obedience to the men in her life. Maria’s spiritual life is repressively but neatly encapsulated in the Catholic tradition that surrounds her, and her sexuality remains unexplored, restricted to the confines of marriage and

motherhood. This is the kind of encapsulation of women's sexuality that H  l  ne Cixous refuses in her *Le Rire de la Meduse*: "On ne peut parler d'une sexualit   feminine, uniforme, homog  ne,    parcours codable, pas plus que d'un inconscient semblable. *L'imaginaire* des femmes est in  puisable" (39). As Cixous would have it, the women writers of post-Quiet Revolution Qu  bec insist on breaking female sexuality's taboo status, allowing it instead to become a site of rich imagination and self-fulfillment.

Women's sexuality has not always been denigrated. In pre-Christian Rome, the ritual of "Sacred Marriage," in which a goddess gives strength and power to the male god through her sexuality in order to end a period of drought and deprivation, was an important part of religious tradition (Lerner 127). By inventing new sexual identities that explore aspects of themselves that have been pushed aside or condemned as "evil" or "sinful," Qu  b  cois women writers after the Quiet Revolution begin to rediscover spiritual depth through sexuality. This growing validation of women's sexuality helps create an image that is both realistic and spiritually empowering. Sexual desire is validated and encouraged, used as a tool for enlightenment rather than a basis for damnation. Cleared at last of its taboo status, women's sexuality is instead illuminated as one significant way in which a woman may express that which is most sacred within her. It is an essential part of the "horizontal transcendence," to borrow William Closson James' term for the spiritual fulfillment found in "a life in the world and in communion with others" (Elder 187). Sexuality is brought out of the darkness and used as a tool for spiritual growth.

The new conception of the feminine in Qu  b  cois literature can be categorized as "r  vision, subversion et r  appropriation" (Maugui  re *Travers  e* 266), and a few dark representations of the power of female sexuality certainly fit into the first two categories. Anne H  bert's texts portray not only the liberating power but also the dark underbelly of female

sexuality: the male desire to destroy it. *Une Saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel*—Marie-Claire Blais' caustic response to the *roman de la terre*—shows young and impressionable Héloïse finding “fulfillment” in prostitution, suggesting that this just may be the best of all possible options in the poverty-stricken and overpopulated world of post-war Québec, and may be read as the first steps toward reappropriation. The last three texts that I will discuss—*L'Ange de la solitude*, *L'Euguélionne*, and *Le Pique-nique sur l'Acropole*—demonstrate a more positive side of sexuality as a way of connecting with the divine in oneself and in another person, while still honoring the complexity of this domain. Though they often still struggle with shame regarding their sexuality, the women in these texts are released from their attachments to Catholic ideology and begin to move to a place of sexual self-acceptance and freedom, suggesting hope for the reintegration of the female body into Québec women's spiritual lives. These texts represent the movement away from subversion of the old model, looking forward in search of an image of sexuality that encompasses women's entire existence by leading to their spiritual transcendence.

I will begin my discussion with a text that demonstrates the immense power of women's sexuality. Set in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Québec, Anne Hébert's *Kamouraska* is an appropriate foundation for a discussion of the reassessment and subversion of women's sexuality in Québec. Although the heroine of this novel is a member of the city-dwelling upper class of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and our other heroines will be members of the middle or lower class in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the same constraints on sexual expression appear to be at play. Like Blais' Héloïse who escapes from her mundane life through mystical fantasies and sexual exploits, and Bersianik's Omicronne who struggles with leaving her past life behind in order to embark on a sexually and spiritually fulfilling journey, Elisabeth d'Aulnières experiences the difficulty of living as a sexual being at a time when women's lives were largely dictated by the Christian institutions of



marriage and maternity. She begins life as a dutiful young girl seemingly destined for a proper life that will be restricted to marriage and motherhood, missing the passionate sexual love that would allow her to feel complete (11).

It is therefore Elisabeth's sexual desire that motivates her to embark on a dangerous, criminal (and ultimately impossible) journey toward freedom and happiness. She experiences the symbolic birth of her dormant sexuality only when she breaks away from her role as cloistered wife and mother; this rebirth is symbolically acted out when George Nelson encourages Elisabeth to undress in front of his window one late night when she comes to visit him, exposing both her naked body and their illicit relationship to the eyes of those passing by in the street. George suggests the equality of their relationship—entirely lacking in her marriage to Antoine—by undressing himself as well, making himself vulnerable as well to the gaze of passers-by. Elisabeth's shame is replaced by desire as George possesses her: “Un gémissement parvient à sortir de ma gorge. Avant même que George ne me couche sur le tas de vêtements par terre. Le poids d'un homme sur moi. Son poil de bête noire. Son sexe dur comme une arme” (159). The pleasure experienced by Elisabeth in George's arms negates the harsh judgment of society that awaits her just outside their love nest.

Elisabeth's hunger for a spiritual catharsis in her regimented life is fed by the intense sexual pleasure that she finds with George. Elisabeth's passionate desire for this stranger is symbolic of her need to escape the oppressive world in which she was raised; her desire seems even to hinge on the element of danger and intrigue in their relationship, thriving on the tension created by the malicious presence of her husband. Rushing to tell George of her husband's violence towards her, she delights in his anger towards Antoine. This manipulation of George's anger takes on the form of sexual foreplay:

Je lui dis que mon mari est revenu à la maison, qu'il m'a défendu d'aller à Saint-Ours et qu'il m'a donné un coup de poing dans le ventre. Je regarde avec avidité le visage de George. Une pâleur grise lui blanchit les lèvres. Comme celle des morts. Je voudrais l'apaiser, m'excuser de l'avoir réduit à une telle extrémité de rage. Et, en même temps, une joie extraordinaire se lève en moi. Me fait battre le coeur de reconnaissance et d'espoir. Toute haine épousée, me voici liée à cet homme, dans une seule passion sauvage. (136)

The sexual elation that she experiences in the face of George's anger underscores the marginal nature of her sexual impulse; instead of existing in the "acceptable" domain of marriage, Elisabeth's desire is fueled by her anger and humiliation, as shown in the ball scene where she is again exposed to the public eye upon their arrival, her dress wet with snow and her hair undone after her and George's lovemaking in the snow. The dangerous and compromising attention that they attract heightens George and Elisabeth's desire for each other:

Il s'agit maintenant de nous compromettre à jamais. De provoquer le scandale. D'accepter sans retour qu'on nous accuse et nous montre du doigt. Tous deux liés ensemble dans une seule nécessité. Ayant rompu avec le monde. L'absolu de l'amour et de la mort. La justice rétablie. La sainte barbarie instituée. Nous serons sauvés par elle. Nous sommes possédés. (158)

Her society's repressive attitude towards sexuality forces Elisabeth to search for a violent form of sexual self-realization. Her insistence on risk-taking and the enjoyment that it offers seems to provide a sense of individuality and power. Perhaps most important, Elisabeth's sexuality creates an identity that is opposed to that of her husband and family, separating her from the restrictions and expectations of the upper class atmosphere of her childhood. She is no

longer “un ventre fidèle, une matrice à faire des enfants”; her affair with George validates her body and her sexuality as something other than a baby factory (10). This new awareness of her sexuality becomes a unique form of spiritual salvation that is more palpable than the abstract salvation afforded by the Church:

Sauvez-moi, docteur Nelson! Sauvez-vous avec moi! Non pas avec des prières et des alchimies vertueuses et abstraites. Mais avec toute votre chair d’homme vivant, avec toute ma chair de femme vivante. (170)

Elisabeth’s salvation is George’s downfall however, as the impossibility of divorce leads them to make the irreversible and criminal decision to kill Antoine. Elisabeth’s feeling of loss for the sexual liberation that she experienced with George follows her as the years pass, as she realizes the grave consequences of her loss.

In reality Elisabeth is an outsider in the repressed society of 19<sup>th</sup> century Québec: she mimics the actions of a submissive (and sexually repressed) Québécois woman of 1839, but the force of her desire will not allow her to fully integrate into society. Her deepest desire is to escape from Québec and live a sexually and spiritually liberated existence with George, but her dream is destroyed when she finds the shadow of her dead husband’s violent traits on her lover’s face: “Il se tourne vers moi. Mon Dieu, est-ce ainsi que je vais retrouver son beau visage, envahi, trituré, détruit par le rire?” (240). The liberation afforded by George never comes, for the letter sent by George asking her to come to him never arrives. Her life without George leaves her spiritually empty, wandering like a sleepwalker through her own life: “J’évite de bouger. Je fais semblant de vivre. J’apprends peu à peu à mourir. J’attends une lettre. J’ai tous les gestes, l’apparence, les vêtements, le linge, la coiffure et les chaussures d’une vivante. Mais je suis morte. Seule l’attente d’une certaine lettre me bat dans les veines” (246). Having lost the object

and expression of her passions, Elisabeth resigns herself to the role of a weak and delicate creature, “d’une santé bien fragile... s’affaiblit considérablement...souffre beaucoup d’un crachement de sang” (244). The picture painted by Tante Adélaïde belies the passionate Elisabeth who braved snowstorms and public humiliation to be with her lover; it is nonetheless this submissive shadow of her former self that Elisabeth accepts as her identity after losing George. She reverts to the submissive wife and mother of her previous life, pretending to fit into a world that does not fulfill her deepest desires. Her fear of the unknown that led her to hesitate in following George to America leads her also to return to the state of a desexualized mother and wife:

Il aurait fallu me décider plus tôt. Partir avec George. Être déportée avec lui. Au coeur même de la malédiction de la terre. Plus qu’un pays étranger. La terre entière étrangère. L’exil parfait. La solitude des fous. Voyez comme on nous montre du doigt. (248)

The condemnation of Québécois society would cause Elisabeth to lose everything including her children and social status. Instead, she reestablishes herself in the community in order to live out the remainder of her life in relative peace and material comfort. The redemption offered by her marriage to Jérôme Rolland, permitting her reintegration into society, is empty of the possibility of a satisfying sexual and spiritual existence; this last marriage, however, is no less a prison than her first, and her moments of reverie juxtapose her present life with the memories of her passionate affair, and her thoughts of fleeing to America to find him:

Partir, à la recherche de l’unique douceur de mon coeur. Amour perdu. Toute cette marmaille à porter et à mettre au monde, à élever au sein, à sevrer.  
Occupation de mes jours et de mes nuits. Cela me tue et me fait vivre tout à la

fois. Je suis occupée à plein temps. Onze maternités en vingt-deux ans. Terre aveugle, tant de sang et de lait, de placenta en galettes brisées. Pauvre Elisabeth, prodigue Elisabeth. (11)

Elisabeth's desire to fully possess her sexuality and escape the smothering bonds of marriage and motherhood are ultimately incompatible with the values of the society in which she lives; her search for a more profound meaning for her life, manifested in her affair with George, is short-lived and ultimately unsuccessful. She must instead learn to hide those thoughts and feelings that are not compatible with a woman's role in 19<sup>th</sup> century Québec. Her second husband, although in no way like her drunken first husband, is nonetheless incapable of inspiring passion in her. In the end, Elisabeth's new life is like a role that she might play in the theatre. This loss leaves her spiritually dead, watching her life unfurl like an outsider: "Où es-tu, mon amour? Dans quel pays étranger? Une si longue absence. J'habite rue du Parloir, à Québec. On va jusqu'à prétendre que je suis Mme Rolland, épouse de Jérôme Rolland, notaire de cette ville" (160).

The taste of sexual pleasure that Elisabeth finds with George only serves to illuminate the spiritual deprivation of the rest of her life. In accepting a desexualized existence as Jérôme Rolland's wife, Elisabeth buries herself in a numbness in which her past life of sexual passion is merely a faint memory. Hébert's dark novel paints a stark picture of the possibilities for the women of Old Québec, whose sexuality was seen as a manifestation of the devil. Elisabeth's double life creates an opposition "d'enfermement et d'évasion, des phantasmes de doubles fous qui fonctionnent comme les substituts asociaux d'héroïnes dociles" (quoted from *The Madwoman in the Attic* in Mauguère *Traversée* 263). This double life allows Elisabeth to retain

her darkest desires (in the form of the decaying bog-woman of her subconscious) while remaining—through marriages to wealthy men—a respected member of upper-class society,

Hébert's *Les Enfants du Sabbat* provides a second, more extreme example of this double life, pitting the Catholic Church against the gods of the underworld; the character of Julie de la Trinité straddles the psychic space between the convent and the pagan “cabane” of her childhood, slowly sliding toward an outright rejection of the former. Nowhere is the tension between the two institutions more clear than in Julie's pregnancy with “le serpent qui a vaincu Dieu,” which mocks the image of the eternally virginal Mary. Caught in the middle of these two traditions—the earthbound, flesh-centered rituals of the Occult, and the pious, heaven-centered Catholic tradition—Julie's body becomes a pawn of both, as shown in her violent experience as Satan's “épouse”: although clearly a paranormal coupling, its effects are entirely physical. The morning after, Julie has a burn on her lower back and bloodstains on her skirt, stains attributed by the convent doctor to a “fibrome possible dans la matrice” (71).

This dismissal of Julie's body—and the ensuing efforts to perform major surgery to remove all of her reproductive organs—is characteristic of the Catholic view of the woman's body: this is underscored by the humiliation visited upon Julie by her Mother Superior, who refuses to allow her to wash her soiled nightgown. Although meant as a punishment, this in fact makes Julie's dream-like voyages to “la montagne de B”... more pleasurable: “Plus je macère dans ma crasse... plus je suis contente et joyeuse dans un autre monde” (57). The discomforts of the Convent only push her more deeply toward the hedonistic pleasures of her previous life. Her contemplation of the unwashed nightgown leads Julie to recall nostalgically a lusty moment from her childhood, she and Joseph gorging themselves on wild berries while her parents copulated outside the house. This pleasurable memory manifests itself physically, as the other nuns watch

in horror: “Elle est secouée, de la tête aux pieds, par une tempête de plaisir, comme si on la chatouillait...Elle tire la langue comme si elle mangeait une glace. Son ventre et sa croupe s’agitent frénétiquement, d’une façon fort indécente” (59). It is no accident that the focus of her movement is in her belly and her hips, the most obvious physical site of sexual activity. Julie’s out-of-body travels to “la cabane” of her childhood are an essential part of her journey of self-discovery from pain to pleasure (Elder xviii). Although Julie attempts to fit in at the convent and restrain herself from these excessive displays, her sensual nature is irrepressible. Rather than expressing the erotic side of spiritual ecstasy, Julie’s sexual trance opposes itself to the stoic celibacy of the convent, insisting instead upon the pleasures of the physical body.

Feared and rejected by the Church because of its perceived seductive and pleasurable qualities, the female body is revered in the tradition of sorcery. The all-importance of woman’s sexuality in this tradition is evident in the character of Philomène, the revered sorceress who will perform the ritual of seducing her own son and thus engendering an incestuous child-grandchild. The result of this monstrous copulation will be the greatest sorcerer of all, so Philomène’s failure to seduce the timid and frightened Joseph brings upon her the condemnation of her followers, who had previously revered “La Goglué” for her powers of seduction and fertility: “Elle se couche sur lui, se livre aux caresses les plus tendres qu’elle ait jamais prodiguées. L’enfant pleure. Il dit qu’il a froid et qu’il a peur. Quelqu’un dans l’assemblée crie que la sorcière a perdu son pouvoir” (99). Having witnessed her mother’s failure, Julie is determined to succeed in her sexual conquests, such as her forceful seduction of docteur Painchaud. The language used to describe his obsession with Julie parodies the biblical veneration of the Virgin Mary:

Vous êtes bénie entre toutes les femmes... se répète le docteur en pensant à Sœur Julie...Pleine de grâces, le démon est avec vous...Il se demande si Sœur Julie de

la Trinité est vraiment belle? Il désire, plus que tout au monde, en avoir la certitude. En même temps, il craint de la regarder en face. Plus que la beauté, c'est la vitalité, l'énergie qui domine chez elle. Un corps extraordinaire. Une force anormale. (134)

Julie is torn between violent flashbacks to her former life and the oppression of her present life, appearing to inhabit both worlds simultaneously while gradually becoming aware of this duality. The convent is ultimately no match for the all-encompassing darkness of her past, however, and little by little this past takes over, as Julie gains awareness and acceptance of her darker side and experiences a reawakening of her socially unacceptable “demonic” (sexual) identity. Her spiritual demons are released and Julie is able to live fully in her demonic body, owning the pleasure and the pain that come with her spiritual awakening.

Julie's sexual power threatens the stability of the convent, for she has become “le centre de la vie,” existing “si fortement, parmi les mortes-vivantes, que cela devient intolérable” (175). In a desperate plea for help that shows their loss of faith in the previously all-powerful binary division of good v. evil, the nuns plead for supernatural intervention: “Elles supplient tout bas Dieu ou le diable. Aucune importance. Pourvu qu'on les entende et les exauce!” (124). In injecting the convent with the frightening power of her sensuality and supernatural powers, Julie has recreated the sensual pleasures of her occult past, transforming the sterile convent where “la vie vient mourir... en longues lames assourdies, contre les marches de pierre” (50) into a supernatural madhouse. Her sexuality overtakes her as well as the other members of the convent, seducing even the priest who comes to exorcise her demons:

C'est pourtant de soeur Julie elle-même que s'échappe un enchantement qui gagne aussi le grand exorciste et le ravit. A chaque onction qu'il fait sur soeur



Julie, il croit sentir passer sous ses doigts délicats toute la moelleuse opulence des tissus les plus beaux et les plus fins d'Europe, d'Amérique, d'Afrique et d'Asie.

(171)

Docteur Painchaud feels literally penetrated by Julie's powerful gaze, "jusqu'à la moelle de ses os, avalé, en quelque sorte, mastiqué et recraché, avec dégoût, sur le parquet bien ciré, comme de la bouillie" (71). His fear of Julie's sexuality leads the doctor to the extreme decision to "lui ouvrir le ventre et le recoudre à volonté, jeter aux ordures tout ce bataclan obscène (ovaires et matrice) qui ne peut servir à rien" (72). Whereas in her pagan childhood her body and her reproductive organs were venerated and worshipped as the root of future generations of Witches, at the convent they are considered worthless "ordures" that serve only to fuel Julie's hysterical fits.

The doctor's desire to destroy Julie's sexual power does not go unpunished, however, for Julie's restless spirit comes to taunt him in a nightmare: "Je suis ta night-mère, ta sorcière de nuit...je te monterai à mort, mon pauvre petit cheval idiot". The doctor finds himself subjected to Julie, who not only elicits fear but also desire in him: "Le poids de Sœur Julie se fait plus oppressant. Tandis que la volupté monte en vagues pour emporter le docteur au-delà de la mort, à la fois redoutée et désirée" (73). In the end Julie succeeds in destroying all who inhabit the convent of *Précieux-sang*. In this sinister vision of the power of women's sexuality, the reader senses Hébert's difficulty in reconciling the power of sexuality with mainstream Catholicism, instead placing Julie outside of the traditional religion and in an alternate world that venerates the female body. The subversion of the traditional model of female sexuality finds its pinnacle in this text that illuminates the complexity and difficulty of reintegrating women's sexuality into Québécois society.

Whereas *Les Enfants du Sabbat* draws out the underlying tensions between Catholicism and women's sexuality, Hébert's later work *Les Fous de Bassan* moves from the realm of the supernatural to the imaginary village of Griffin Creek, whose placid setting serves as a framework for the violent reaction of the masculine population to the budding sexuality of two young cousins. *Les Fous de Bassan* highlights the ambivalent attitude of traditional Canadian society towards female sexuality, which provokes both fear and desire in the men of Griffin Creek. The pure sexual desire exhibited by the young girls poses a great threat to the patriarchal order there, to the extent that the girls must be killed in order to restore peace. The idea of women's sexuality eliciting fear and mistrust on the part of men is not a novel one: in setting forth "strict guidelines for women's dress and ways of acting," the Church Father, Saint Jérôme, hoped to "neutralize the destructive power of women's bodies" (Isherwood 75). It is precisely this outlook that leads the men of Griffin Creek to both desire and seek to destroy Nora and Olivia.

Though Stevens Brown is the central suspect (and finally confesses to their rape and murder in his old age), he is not alone in having perverted views of sexuality in this small community of "frères sauvages et durs" (40). Many men are under suspicion as to their relations with Nora and Olivia, having exhibited sexual interest in the cousins, their desire mingled with mistrust and terror. Even the nieces' uncle Nicolas, whose profession in the Church demands that he be above any reproach of sexual misconduct, is torn between his desire for his nieces and his need to be respected in the community. His sexual attraction elicits feelings of fear and trepidation, as the two girls appear as a fantastical two-headed creature that one would expect to find in ancient mythology: "Un seul animal fabuleux, pense-t-il, à deux têtes, deux corps, quatre jambes et quatre bras, fait pour l'adoration ou le massacre" (31). The conflicting emotions

awakened in Nicolas are shown in the opposition of his erotic daydreams about the girls with his violent reaction upon witnessing their flirtations with other men. Hébert's questioning of the infallibility of the clergy appears in her depiction of Nicolas' unsavory desire for the two girls: "Vais-je de nouveau me mettre le nez dans mon péché? Avouer que...je soupèse en secret le poids léger, la forme délicate des petites Atkins?" (24). Although he is supposed to be Griffin Creek's beacon of moral rectitude, Nicolas is haunted by his secret sins surrounding the death of the two girls: "Mon Dieu est-ce possible? Dois-je revivre à l'instant l'été 1936, être à nouveau celui qui convoite la vie et se fait complice de la mort?" (46). While having apparently little to do with their actual death, he spent many hours previous to their disappearance spying on the girls, especially Nora, even fondling her inappropriately when they are finally alone.

Acutely aware of the power of their sexuality on the men of Griffin Creek, Nora and Olivia do not hesitate to use it to their advantage. The girls' sexual self-awareness is not only threatening to Stevens, who "strangles Nora to reassert his traditional manhood in the face of this latently modern woman," (Tulloch 103) but to all of the men of Griffin Creek, for it threatens to destabilize their placid, patriarchal village life. When Bob Allen sneaks a kiss from Nora Atkins as she is returning from her cousin's house, she is enticed, not intimidated: "Cela m'a donné des idées de fun de par tout le corps comme si j'avais la chair de poule" (119). Like Lydie in *L'Enfant chargé de songes* who insists on controlling every aspect of the loss of her virginity, Nora consciously decides that Bob Allen will not be her first sexual experience, for she would rather lose her virginity to someone more attractive. Nora recognizes her sexuality as a valuable part of her existence, and she guards it as such. This new desire appears to her not as a mere physical impulse but as a new birth. Comparing herself to the mythical first woman, Eve, Nora shows a profound awareness of the importance of her initiation into the world of sex:

J'ai quinze ans. Je résonne encore de l'éclat de ma nouvelle naissance. Eve nouvelle. Je sais comment sont faits les garçons. Cet aiguillon que les mères ont planté au milieu de leurs corps, et moi je suis creuse et humide. En attente. Sans nous déshabiller, encombrés de nos vêtements, sans même nous tenir la main, les garçons et moi, nous communiquons déjà, par le frisson, par la fièvre cachée.

(118)

Reveling in her sexuality, Nora “[abandons herself] to the Cixousian laugh...Defiantly and pleasurably assuming her own power of (female) speech and her own expression of desire, she represents a socio-sexual threat to this would-be patriarch.” (Tulloch 103-04). This allusion to the Cixousian laugh refers to the prologue to Nora’s book in Hébert’s text, which is drawn from Cixous’ “Le Rire de la Meduse”: “rit à torrent et ventre à terre et à toute volée et à tire-d’aile et à flots et comme elle l’entend” (109). Nora’s sexuality is embodied in her unapologetic and sensual laugh: “Il s’égrène, léger et cristallin, dans la nuit de campagne baignée de lune” (203). Stevens is threatened and angered by Nora’s laugh, for it mocks his lack of power over her: “Nora qui rit, le rire de Nora encore plus éclatant qui reprend, cette fois face à Stevens, son petit visage pointu levé vers Stevens, ses yeux plissés de rire” (219). Her unrepentant laugh is an appropriate expression of her sexuality that both seduces and threatens the men who come into contact with her, the first manifestations of sexual freedom as written by Cixous:

Orageuses, ce qui est nôtre se détache de nous sans que nous redoutions de nous affaiblir: nos regards s’en vont, nos sourires filent, les rires de toutes nos bouches, nos sangs coulent et nous nous répandons sans nous épuiser, nos pensées, nos signes, nos écrits, nous ne les retenons pas et nous ne craignons pas de manquer (41).

Nora's Cixousian laugh terrifies Stevens, who will go so far as to kill her to silence the threatening, unapologetic, sexual laugh. Olivia, however, is less eager than Nora to flaunt her sexuality. However, when Stevens Brown returns to Griffin Creek after a long absence, she experiences sexual desire for the first time in a simple flirtation with him.

La joie, la saveur entière d'un seul coup. Exister si fort à Griffin Creek, au bord d'un champ de base-ball, que l'herbe, les arbres, les clameurs, la lumière, l'eau et le sable tout à côté, les oiseaux qui passent en criant au-dessus de nos têtes existent avec nous, dans un seul souffle. (213)

Far from being limited to physical desire, Olivia's sexual awakening opens her to the world around her and allows her to appreciate the beauty of the village in which she lives. The cousins' awareness and enjoyment of their sexuality is most disconcerting to Stevens, whose identity depends largely on possessing women who fear and resist him. His possession of the older Maureen depends upon her resistance to his advances:

[E]lle n'a plus de force du tout dans les bras et les jambes, Elle se met à trembler... Tout nu et ruisselant, je l'emporte dans sa chambre sur son lit défait. Elle proteste et dit qu'elle ne pourra pas, que ça fait dix ans que son mari est mort et qu'elle n'est plus une femme, ni rien de semblable, qu'elle est trop vieille. (68)

As Stevens' desire is stimulated only when he meets resistance, he is most attracted to Olivia when she is "résistante dans sa peur de moi, de mon corps sauvage, de mon coeur mauvais. Cette fille est déchirée entre sa peur de moi et son attirance de moi" (80). Her fear allows him to feel strong, whereas her advances weaken him. It is for this reason that Stevens' desire for Maureen is abated when she begins to express desire for him:

[J]’en ai de moins en moins envie, à mesure qu’elle se réveille sous moi, pareille à une chatte en chaleur. Ma volonté est de dormir tout seul, la nuit, et de me satisfaire tout seul, si l’envie me prend. (69)

The image of Maureen as a cat in heat is recalled in Stevens’ comparison of all three women (Nora, Olivia, and Maureen) as a herd of livestock ready for slaughter: “Débarrasser des oripeaux, réduites au seul désir, humides et chaudes, les aligner devant soi, en un seul troupeau bêlant. Maureen, la petite Nora, Olivia sans doute. J’ai tout mon temps” (82). Stevens sees the three women, reduced to their animal instincts, as deserving an animal’s death.

If it is true that “Stevens kills Nora... so that he can unite with the idealized mother figure (Olivia) and thereby (violently) consummate his Oedipal trajectory,” (Tulloch 103) then perhaps this is also part of Nicolas’ feelings of guilt and complicity in the murder of the two girls. We learn in the first “book” that Nicolas was rejected by his mother and strongly desired to open what he saw as the “cage” of her heart: “Par quelle prière magique, quelle invention de l’amour-fou pourrais-je délivrer le cœur de ma mère? J’en rêve comme d’une mission impossible. Tombe en extase si la main de Felicity effleure ma main” (25). The use of the word “extase” emphasizes the sexual undertones of Nicolas’ feelings towards his mother, and the pain of her rejection. The deprivation of his childhood leaves him desperate for physical contact with a woman: “C’est pas le lait tout cru qu’elle m’a donné, Beatrice ma mère, c’est la faim et la soif. Le désir” (87).

Like Stevens, Nicolas secretly wishes to destroy the uncontrollable sexuality of his nieces, in part because it reminds him of the unattainable love of his mother. His ambivalent reaction to their blossoming sexuality is mirrored in his sterile marriage to the unhappy Irène. He has apparently married her for little reason but to guarantee himself a male heir, but their

marriage is bereft of sexual interaction, and the sinful realm to which Nicolas exiles this part of his experience appears to make it all the more enticing for him. His puritanical ideals lead him to want both to possess and to destroy the girls' sexuality, along with the inadmissible feelings they awaken in him. He is made uncomfortable by their power over him, preferring his wife Irène, sterile in body and spirit, who is utterly non-threatening in her asexuality. Her barrenness even allows Nicolas to feel benevolent in acceptance of her barrenness: "En d'autres lieux, sous d'autres lois, je l'aurais déjà répudiée, au vu et au su de tous, comme une créature inutile... Elle dort contre moi, sa vie froide de poisson, son oeil de poisson" (23).

While Olivia and Nora tread the dangerous line between sexual independence and sexual object, there are two women characters whose isolation from the perverse community makes a strong statement in and of itself. The twins Pat and Pam prefer sexual abstinence to coupling with the perverse men of Griffin Creek, and together they create something of a matrifocal utopian family in which they are the silent but sturdy "old maids" of the village. Although they rarely speak, the twins are not silent on the subject of the sordid murder of the Atkins cousins, or for that matter on Nicolas' wife Irène's suicide in the wake of his flirtations with the former. The twins inscribe the three names of the dead on the walls of Nicolas' library, followed by "ététététététététététété..." and beneath it "193619361936193619361936..." (17). Their drawings constantly haunt him, reminding him of the dark story of the young girls:

A symbol of the haunting presence of the absent dead, the bizarre, dream-like heads of Nora, Olivia, and Irène have emerged from the sea as if from a collective feminine unconscious to refuse invisibility and annihilation. In this regard Pat and Pam play an important if ambiguous role, both as servants of the patriarchal master and as independent old maids whose lifelong refusal to submit sexually to

men has spawned a secret power and malicious desire to thwart male authority.

(Gould, "Absence" 924)

Pat and Pam inspire curiosity in Nicolas, who concludes that "ces filles sont folles". They nonetheless help him to rid his conscience of the constant guilt of three violent deaths, washing the entire house daily "comme s'il s'agissait d'effacer une tache sans cesse renaissante" (17). Nicolas' only enjoyment of the twins' company is when he reprimands them and they appear to be afraid of him, proving to him that they are not a threat to his masculinity. The twins are in this way opposed to Nora and Olivia, whose failure to demonstrate an appropriate fear of male domination makes them the victim of Stevens' ultimate violence.

Nora and Olivia's lack of resistance angers and threatens Stevens, as it nullifies his own sexual superiority over them. When he does not receive the resistance that he desires from them, the only way to reassert his power is to extinguish their young lives. In killing the young cousins, Stevens realizes his perverse dream of putting women in their place: "Ce que je déteste le monde feutré des femmes...Il n'y a que mon oncle Nicolas pour les calmer et leur faire entendre raison. Au nom de Dieu et de la loi de l'Eglise qui sait remettre les femmes à leur place" (88). The two girls are utterly unimpressed by Stevens' efforts to dominate them: they make fun of him and threaten to diminish his masculinity: "(Nora) répète que je ne suis pas un homme. Dit à Olivia de se méfier de moi. Renverse la tête. Son rire de gorge en cascade. Désir frustré...Son rire hystérique sous mes doigts. Cette fille est folle. La boule dure du rire, dans la gorge, sous mes doigts. Simple pression des doigts." (244). Only by strangling the life out of the two girls can he save himself from his weakness in regards to them:

With the murders of Nora and Olivia Atkins, Stevens Brown has arrested the sexual development of Nora whose aggressive female desire both annoyed and



excited him. He has also hidden his own defilement of the too pure, too beautiful Olivia by drowning her in the sea. Finally, he has robbed both adolescents of the maternal roles that eventually awaited them as grown women. This theft of the maternal is entirely consistent with Stevens' earlier admission of hatred for the world of married women. (Gould, "Absence" 927)

The violent desire to extinguish the cousins' blossoming sexuality points us to the great power present within this element of their psyches. Although unrealized, because cut tragically short, the girls' sexual freedom pointed to a new vision of women's sexuality, perhaps one that no longer elicited shame but rather served as an important part of self-knowledge and self-fulfillment.

This image of the violent threat of female sexuality to the misogynist male is repeated in *Le Premier jardin*, wherein Flora relives the story of Aurore, another instance of a young girl murdered for her liberated sexuality:

The young country girl, Aurore, like so many others of her kind, came to the city to work as a maid. Aurore: raped and murdered at eighteen for her naturalness, for her freedom of movement—'les mouvements légers de la danseuse' (119). A victim blamed for her seductiveness: 'cette fille le fait exprès aussi' (118), and killed by her employers' son, who was never accused as the murderer. (Rea 124)

Like Olivia and Nora's troubling sexuality, this story presents a picture of the strength couched in women's sexual desire, but these images stop short of the fulfillment that such sexual freedom might produce. Hébert instead illustrates the danger of putting female sexuality in a dark corner, suggesting that it must instead be brought back from the underworld and reintegrated into the realm of humanity.

While *Les Fous de Bassan* depicts the victimization of the sexual female, *L'Enfant chargé de songes* presents the wild and sexually charged female as exerting domination over those around her, even causing the death of the innocent Hélène. The character of Lydie in Hébert's *L'Enfant chargé de songes* embodies the tension between women's growing awareness of their sexuality and the reactionary ideologies of the Catholic society of pre-Quiet Revolution Québec. It is helpful to see the character of Lydie as an allegory of female sexuality: a sexually charged mirage and the embodiment of the unchained feminine spirit that is so fearsome in the eyes of traditional Québécois society, wreaking destruction upon those around her. Lydie, "la contestataire, la marginale, l'exilée," is recognized as a part of Hébert's subversion of sexual norms: "Lydie la transgressive...se marque par sa sensualité *intransitive*, inutile, n'aboutissant à rien de positif" (Bishop 12). Pitting Lydie against the sterile and asexual character of Pauline, Hébert opposes two stereotypes in Catholic culture: the sacred mother and the whore. In this case, however, the whore is in control of her sexuality, deciding when and where, and if, to engage in the sexual act. The villagers, retaining their belief in the erstwhile Catholic order of Québec, view Lydie as a temptress whose flagrant sensuality mocks their strict moral code and the values to which they hold so tightly. The conflict of these two worlds—the past world of sexual repression and the future vision of sexual freedom—provides the basis for this dark text.

Lydie's first appearance in *L'Enfant chargé de songes* marks her as the incarnation of those aspects of the female spirit that are refused in the Catholic Church: having disobeyed her foster parents by stealing their horse, she parades her disobedience defiantly throughout the village. She enters the village "comme une apparition," her appearance recalls that of a creature from the underworld. Riding bareback with her bare legs spread wide apart astride the horse, her bold sexuality incites the desire of a villager who remembers neither the details of her face or

whether she was beautiful, “mais il se souvenait de ses longues cuisses écartées lorsqu’elle était sur le cheval” (44).

Lydie fearlessly takes the patriarchal designation of women as the object of the male gaze and uses it to her advantage. This is contrary to the traditional view of woman as the object of the male gaze, usually a symbol of powerlessness on the part of the woman. Lydie refuses to give up her power, however, and forcefully appropriates the attention of all who surround her (not only men), using her objectified position as a source of power. This strength is contrasted with Pauline, the fearful mother, whose children are both targets of Lydie’s destructive desire. When Pauline begs her children to not look at Lydie, she affirms that Lydie finds her predatory strength in being gazed upon (61). Lydie’s childhood primed her for this position as the object of the gaze: as a young child she would be placed nude in the middle of the dining room table “en guise de centre de table”, and the applause of her parents’ dinner guests still rings in her ears (57). Lydie’s awareness of her own allure, set in motion by her parents’ adulation, exists independently of the act of sexual intercourse: the physical act serves only to affirm what she already possesses, an intrinsic sexual confidence and enjoyment of her own body. Her unabashed exhibition and appreciation of her own sexual allure—this despite the physical disfigurement that she suffers—signifies the resurrection of hedonistic pleasure for Québécois women. Lydie’s behavior is in flagrant opposition to the behavior proscribed for women by the Church (Cahill 255).

Lydie’s attitude is not, however, a simple glorification of women’s objectified sexual status vis-à-vis patriarchal society. Lydie claims ownership of her sexuality, and her refusal to be a sexual puppet to her father’s lecherous friends underscores her sexual independence. The

sacred element at the core of her beauty is Lydie's alone, a beauty to which no man will ever have access:

[E]lle avait l'impression qu'ils convoitaient plus que sa beauté naissante, jusqu'à ce qui était sacré à l'intérieur même de cette beauté. Elle les injurait alors de toutes ses forces, se moquant d'eux avec un art de la dérision qui les étonnait. (57)

Lydie's experience of pleasure through her defiant sexuality sets the patriarchal system of the village against her. The men are both excited and threatened by her, and as a result they do not know how to behave towards her. Even her foster father, pressured by his wife to scold Lydie for her behavior, does so very tentatively. When the villager Alexis Boilard arrogantly assumes that Lydie would like to go for a ride in his truck, Lydie humiliates his masculine pride by placing a necklace of shimmering glass beads around his neck:

Et voici que, dans un seul éclair, il retrouve en lui l'image qu'il s'était toujours faite de sa petite personne ombrageuse et virile. Un coq de village se dresse sur ses ergots, la crête flamboyante, emplit son coeur de dépit et de violence. Il arrache le collier de son cou. (53)

When at last the defiant Lydie accepts the advances of Alexis, it is done in a refusal of submission: "Elle l'insulte et le nargue...et voici qu'une petite voix inconnue émerge d'elle, qui réclame tout son plaisir et donne des indications précises" (91). Lydie's manipulation of all aspects of her first sexual encounter makes clear that she is rejecting the stereotype of the blushing virgin by actively choosing and orchestrating her experience. It is only after having lost her virginity to Alexis that she is willing to be intimate with Julien, who has been sheltered from any contact with the opposite sex throughout his childhood. This experienced female initiates the virginal male into the world of sexuality in a clearly deliberate reversal of the traditional story of

the young virginal girl being “taught” by the more experienced male. Lydie’s sexual mentoring of Julien gives her control over her own sexuality. This role reversal demonstrates Hébert’s desire to bend traditional gender roles, and, most importantly, to question those roles that no longer fit.

Lydie’s capacity to own her sexuality and assert her individualism places her in direct opposition to the character of Pauline, a conflict that is clearly perceived by the latter’s son Julien. Years after his seduction by Lydie, and after the death of his mother, Julien dreams of the two women struggling for possession of his spirit:

Une grande fille aux longs cheveux noirs se montre un instant, l’appelle par son nom, “Mon petit Julien”, rit beaucoup et s’enfuit dans l’ombre de la chambre... Tandis que sa mère, énorme et sacrée, dans des nuages de fumée, prend toute la place contre son lit, se penche et projette des spirales de tabac blond, par le nez et par la bouche. Elle assure que Lydie est maudite et qu’il faut s’en méfier comme de la peste, ainsi que toute autre créature lui ressemblant. (24)

The mother in this text is so separated from her own individuality that, referring only to her children with their proper names, she refers to everyone else—herself included—with the generic “on” or “quelqu’un”: “Un jour, elle s’est coupé le doigt avec un tesson de bouteille et le sang coulait jusque sur sa robe. Elle a dit d’une voix sourde à peine perceptible: -Il y a quelqu’un qui s’est coupé le doigt” (32). Having depersonalized herself in favor of her children, Pauline’s personal identity is as atrophied as her sexual desire. Lydie represents for Pauline all that she has relinquished in order to be the all-sacrificing mother of her children. The two characters represent the struggle between the saintly, asexual (Virgin Mary) figure and the overtly sexual woman who delights in her sexuality. Pauline’s obsessive motherhood, a compensation for her

own neglect as a child, is the sole focus of her existence. Any need or desire that does not concern her children is repressed, above all sexuality: her husband Henri is left entirely out of the picture, even swatted away from his children like “une mouche importune” (36). The disappearance of Pauline’s sexual desire coincides with her becoming a mother, after which she loses all outward signs of female sexuality: she begins to wear her husband’s ill-fitting old work pants and cuts her hair “comme un petit gars qui mène les vaches au pacage” (38). Pauline begins to smoke and put on weight in a purposeful denial of sexuality, the extra pounds and the smoke from her “Players” cigarettes acting as a shield against her husband’s advances. The heavy belt that surrounds her work pants protects her as well: “Si d’aventure son mari entourait sa taille d’un bras fatigué et lui faisait les yeux doux, elle alléguait l’ennui d’avoir à ouvrir sa ceinture de cuir solidement bouclée” (37). Having realized that he is no longer of any use in this household, Henri eventually leaves Pauline and their two children: “Ma femme, je te quitte. Sans doute tu ne t’en apercevras pas, tu sais si bien te passer de moi” (39). Pauline has, in fact, taken the teachings of the Church to heart: she has valued procreation and the raising of her children above all other aspects of her marital relationship, even to the destruction of the latter.

To the extent that she has neglected all relationships in her life in favor of all-encompassing maternity, Pauline refuses to let any outside influence interfere in her children’s lives. This is especially true regarding Lydie, whose arrogant flaunting of her sexuality represents a great threat to Pauline’s cloistered life with her children. The ensuing attack that Lydie wages on Pauline’s children evokes the symbolic battle between saintly maternity and selfish pleasure. “Je les affranchirai, ces Petits, tous les deux. Je serai leur mauvais génie” (59). Pauline fails at her efforts to strip Lydie of her mystical power by inviting her into her home, instead finding herself even more disempowered: “Pauline se sent privée de ses enfants, les

regarde évoluer comme derrière une vitre, alors que la musique les enferme dans un cercle enchanté, là où règne l'étrangère qu'elle a elle-même invitée, à ses risques et périls" (84). Lydie eventually succeeds in separating mother from children, initiating the children into the world of pleasure and ultimately causing the death of the young Héléne. After the death of the daughter and the symbolic loss of the son, Pauline loses her will to speak and even to live. The mother's voice is appropriated both symbolically and physically, silenced by the seductive allure of Lydie's sexuality. In annihilating the mother and releasing the sexual creature into the world, Hébert's allegorical tale evokes the end of the era of maternity that is frightened of female sexuality. The death of the asexual mother is synonymous with the death of sexual repression in this text.

The problematic figure of the asexual mother in Hébert's text is mirrored in Marie-Claire Blais' first text, *Une Saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel*, in which the repressive grandmother watches as her granddaughter finds spiritual fulfillment in the brothel. Though superficially contradictory, the themes of deep religiosity and subversive sexual activity have more in common than it would appear at first glance: the reader senses that similar desires fuel both intense female experiences, and that the difference between profound communion with the divine and profound communion with the sexual self is but a small one. In fact, the harder one tries to repress all sexual aspects of the human psyche (as manifested in the doctrine of the Catholic Church), the more fervently the desires make themselves know.

Héloïse embodies this relationship between mystical religious experience and sexual ardor, but her fervor is entirely incongruous with the environment in which she lives. This mystical Héloïse, self-torturing to better experience's God's presence, is juxtaposed with the image of the rest of the family tending the livestock on their farm. Héloïse alone does not assist

in the labor but instead kneels in the hay to meditate and experience her ardor through self-mortification, the excessively emotional mysticism of her character intensified by the comparison with the mundane act of tending to livestock. Her strange mix of religious fervor and excessive sexuality is out of place in mid-century Québécois society, leading her on a trajectory from convent to brothel; Héloïse searches in vain for an outlet for her sexuality in a society where there is no appropriate expression for it. The overpopulated and undernourished farm that she calls home is hostile to her sexual self-discovery, for Grand-mère Antoinette's harsh reign over the household represses all physical pleasure, even in that of the smallest and most innocent members of the household: "Refusing [Emmanuel] contact with her body, Grand-Mère Antoinette offers him only baths in icy water, the symbolic equivalent of her austere philosophy of life" (Green 72).

According to Green, Antoinette "ultimately forces Héloïse to seek sexual expression in a brothel": Antoinette's sexless severity is contrasted with Héloïse's overflowing sensuality in this text in which Grand-Mère Antoinette is the embodiment of the Catholic denial of sexuality, "having denied her own sexuality by shielding her body with mounds of clothing and having committed herself to the life-denying teachings of the Church" (Green, "Redefining" 129). Héloïse's entry into the local convent provides access to many sensual pleasures, the aesthetic finery of her surroundings appealing to her hunger for beauty and comfort: "La nourriture délicate, les mets soignés, la blancheur des draps, et à son insu, la voix des religieuses, contribuèrent au reveil d'une sensualité fine et menaçante" (29). Her great sensitivity to beauty will be her downfall, however, as her delight in the creature comforts of the convent appears to be only a prelude to irresistible temptations of a more sexual nature. Her sensuality attaches itself not only to her religious fervor but also to the young man who delivers her breakfast and, (her



previous confessor having tired of her “élans personnels”), to her new confessor, a freshly ordained priest who relates all too well to Héloïse’s flamboyant and all-encompassing desire. In reality her desire is of a human nature, and thus not permissible within the convent walls.

Like the mystics of Christianity who performed rituals of self-mortification to bring themselves closer to God, Héloïse’s religious fervor often manifests itself in the form of self-torture. Her young brother Jean-Le Maigre writes in his “mémoires” that from a tender age his sister would regularly torture herself, pricking her fingers with a crown of thorns or with a small sword. The image of Héloïse as she appears in Jean-Le Maigre’s imagination resembles the martyred Saints of Renaissance art, “Et un peu à l’écart, dans les rayons de la lune, Héloïse en extase, les bras en croix, la robe ouverte sur un sein blanc, légèrement soulevé” (74). Her lifted breast exposed in the moonlight suggests a moment of sexual bliss more than religious fervor. Héloïse the nun is not far removed from Héloïse the prostitute; a surprising comparison is highlighted in her “étranges noces” with her mystical “Epoux” shortly before her expulsion from the convent:

Elle languissait de désir auprès de l’Epoux cruel...Elle s’était dépouillée de tous ses vêtements pour la cérémonie...elle allait s’offrir encore au Bien-Aimé absent qui laisserait en elle ces stigmates de l’amour dont elle garderait le secret. Mais au couvent, la visite de l’Epoux était si douce! Elle le recevait sans larmes et sans effroi, toute abandonnée à sa calme torture, à son horrible joie, les yeux fermés, son corps frémissait à peine sous le frêle drap blanc qui le recouvrait. (77)

The placement of this erotic fantasy in the convent serves only to emphasize the sensual nature of Héloïse’s desires which reach beyond her young confessor, extending to her convent sister “Sœur Saint-Georges” and infirmary attendant “Mère Gabriel-des-Anges”. Her pluri-

sexual desires lead her to engage in one of the most heinous acts in the eyes of the Church: masturbation. This is, in fact, what leads to Héloïse being expelled from the Convent (78), for masturbation is considered in the Catholic tradition to be “generally disordered,” believed to stem from unhealthy lust provoked by pornography and leading to “having recourse to prostitution, or engaging in clandestine affairs” (Grabowski 115). This is the same act, however, that Hélène Cixous and other feminists revere as a profound act of self-love:

Monde de recherché, d’élaboration d’un savoir, à partir d’une experimentation systématique des fonctionnement du corps, d’une interrogation précise et passionnée de son érogénéité. Cette pratique, d’une richesse inventive extraordinaire, en particulier de la masturbation, se prolonge ou s’accompagne d’une production de *formes*, d’une véritable activité esthétique, chaque temps de jouissance inscrivant une vision sonore, une *composition*, une chose belle. (39)

Héloïse’s sensual experiences, considered by Cixous and others to be indicative of a creative and fertile spirit, are reviled by her Mother Superior as unpardonable. They are nonetheless strikingly similar to the sensual fantasies of the most revered mystics of Catholic history, like St. Teresa of Avila who “likens the union between God and the soul to the carnal union of man and wife because human sexuality is the experience that most closely approximates the total surrender and perfect melding fundamental to the mystical experience” (Mujica 744). Mechtild of Madgeburg likewise imagined the soul as “a timid servant girl looking longingly at a prince. In imagery drawn from Sacred Heart and Eucharistic devotions, God eagerly bares his red-hot heart to her and takes her into it. The two embrace and mingle together ‘like water and wine.’ (102). Sexuality has long been present in profound experiences of spiritual communion with the divine; Héloïse is perhaps simply not savvy enough to hide the utterly

physical side of the sensual experience from her superior, and would otherwise have enjoyed a long and fulfilling career as a mystic.

Héloïse's poignant dream of a convent / brothel illuminates those elements in both situations that are so attractive to her, illustrating the tension between purity and sensual pleasure, a dichotomous relationship that she relishes as often as possible. Her memories of the convent are transformed in her dream, as "Les Novices," young girls in the process of being inducted into the convent, surround Héloïse in a dancing circle, letting their long hair flow free, inviting Héloïse to dance with them. Despite her superficial attachment to the values of the Church (she is ashamed when the Mother Superior finds her in the grips of her sexual fantasies), Héloïse's obsession with the "Novices" suggests the lesbian relationships that come to the forefront in Blais' later novels. Monique Wittig would see this movement away from the heterosexual imperative as a step towards liberation from the patriarchal grip:

[L]esbianism provides for the moment the only social form in which we can live freely. Lesbian is the only concept I know of which is beyond the categories of sex (woman and man), because the designated subject (lesbian) is *not* a woman, either economically, or politically, or ideologically. For what makes a woman is a specific social relation to a man, a relation that we have previously called servitude. (365)

Héloïse's fleeting liberation from the patriarchal, heterosexist society in which she lives turns sour, however, as self-punishment replaces her sensual enjoyment of the other women. Even in Héloïse's dreams she cannot freely enjoy her sexuality, for her psyche is filled with the recriminations of the Catholic Church aimed at sexually liberated women. The Church's judgment of homosexual activity is indeed unforgiving, condemning homo-genital sex and

insisting that “such a person” should remain celibate rather than engage in sexual activity that will land them in hell (Grabowski 139). In Héloïse’s nightmare, the Church’s judgment takes the form of humiliating physical and spiritual exposure, her hair shorn and her sins recounted and denounced before her peers. Héloïse’s inability to contain her sexual impulses at the convent may be seen as a direct precursor to her decision to enter the world of prostitution. Because a woman cannot lose her virginity and retain a modicum of value in the eyes of the Church, Héloïse’s trajectory personifies the strong thematic link between loss of virginity and prostitution: “[Women] think that since loss of virginity has made them ‘worthless’ and ‘fit for garbage’ they may as well earn money from their bodies” (Hajdukowski-Ahmed 61).

Despite her tendency to self-mortification, Héloïse possesses nonetheless a deeper and stronger bent for self-preservation. Although she derives pleasure from her conflict between spiritual purity and physical gratification, she ultimately seeks to free herself from this impossible ambivalence and find a situation in which she can experience real tenderness and warmth among other human beings. She finds this, in an ironic twist characteristic of Marie-Claire Blais’ dark humor, as a prostitute under “Madame” Octavie’s appropriately named “L’Auberge de la Rose Publique”. In an apparent foreshadowing of what is to come, Héloïse dreams of finding herself again at the luxurious convent, but this time it has been transformed into a “hôtellerie joyeuse que fréquentaient des hommes gras et barbus, des jeunes gens aux joues roses, à qui Héloïse offrait de l’hospitalité pour la nuit” (88). The hospitality that Héloïse experiences in this dreamworld is in the form of her long repressed and hidden sexuality, sexuality that is now welcomed by her clients who are appreciative of her body, slight and malnourished as it may be. Despite the implicit criticism of a life of prostitution, and especially of the social inequities that have left Héloïse few options outside of the brothel, the latter is not

the seedy establishment that one would expect from Blais' satirical novel. Héloïse feels loved for what is perhaps the first time in her sad life, and the brothel for her is what the convent should have been. The warmth that she so desperately sought but did not find in her religious faith is ironically plentiful in the comfortable atmosphere of the brothel. Religious fervor is not encouraged at the brothel, where "la prière n'était pas une chose nécessaire" (111). The similarities between her life at the convent and her new life as a prostitute are nonetheless strikingly similar, and Héloïse never ceases comparing "sa vie à l'Auberge avec le bien-être de la vie au couvent, glissant d'une satisfaction à l'autre, comme on s'évanouit de plaisir ou de douleur dans ses rêves" (112). Héloïse even compares her "Madame" to her Mother Superior: "Madame Octavie aime trop le vin, elle mange trop de fromage. Mère Supérieure aimait bien le fromage, elle aussi. Mais elle n'en mangeait jamais pendant le carême. Peut-être que Madame Octavie devrait jeûner aussi, faire penitence comme Mère Supérieure" (106).

Like Elisabeth in *Kamouraska*, Héloïse lacks an appropriate model of sexual expression and is left to her own devices to achieve fulfillment in this area. Her fulfillment is as spiritual as physical, however, as illustrated in her self-perception as a prostitute: as she entertains the aged town Notary, Héloïse fantasizes that she is a sensual embodiment of the Virgin Mother: "toujours inclinée vers la compassion, elle voyait en l'homme qui piétinait sa jeunesse...l'enfant, le gros enfant des premiers appétits, suspendu à son sein" (117). Even as she copulates with this old man, Héloïse does not see herself as a prostitute; she instead imagines herself to be a vessel of maternal love, nurturing all who enter the brothel with her warm and healing sexuality. Even in this hedonistic setting the figure of the Virgin Mary reigns as the ultimate symbol of femininity, though the sexual element is provided by Héloïse alone, her fertile imagination transposing sexual fantasies onto the asexual image of the Virgin. Although Mme Octavie claims

to want no “enfants de Marie” in her brothel, she has many, for Héloïse is but one of numerous “filles” in Mme Octavie’s establishment who have undergone the transition from nun to prostitute. This strangely common career path provides a dark commentary on Québec’s social history: if women are unable to succeed in the narrow environment of the convent, their only other option outside of a long string of maternities (and what basically amounts to indentured servitude in their own home) is that of selling their bodies and their sexuality to the highest bidder. We might see her choice also as a willingness to avoid at all costs the life that her own mother made for herself: having more children than she can bear and being a slave to her husband and family.

The problematic portrayal of Catholic values represented by Héloïse and the previous heroines of Québécois texts is continued in Blais’ later novel *L’Ange de la Solitude*, which depicts the intertwining lives of a group of women friends and lovers. Héloïse’s sensual bond with her “sisters” at the convent and the comfort provided by her co-workers and “Madame” at the brothel provide nonetheless a glimpse of the strong female bonds that we find in the later text; while *Une Saison dans la vie d’Emmanuel* presents Héloïse’s struggle to find spiritual redemption in a world that offers only spiritual and physical poverty, the heroines of *L’Ange de la solitude* exist in a vacuum of their own making, having little contact with the outside, conventional world. The sense of belonging experienced by “les filles” contrasts strikingly with Blais’ Héloïse, for whom there exists no real sense of belonging and who is condemned to flail about in search of a spiritual sanctuary. No longer concerned with how they are perceived by society, “les filles” are entirely devoted to a personal search for salvation, an appropriate complement to Monique Wittig’s feminist theory that maintains that lesbianism is a path to social liberation, and that women must never forget how oppressed they have been:

A lesbian consciousness should always remember and acknowledge how ‘unnatural,’ compelling, totally oppressive, and destructive being ‘woman’ was for us in the old days before the women’s liberation movement. It was a political constraint and those who resisted it were accused of not being ‘real’ women.

(362)

Like Wittig, these writers refuse to accept the Catholic notion that –because of the supremacy of procreation in sexual activity—homosexual activity is a sin that will land you in hell, and a life without sex is the only way to be homosexual and get into heaven. At various points in Catholic history, the Church has gone so far as to put homosexuality (and masturbation) as a graver sin than rape and incest, as the latter maintain the possibility of procreation (Fox 27). By writing characters whose homosexual tendencies are not only pleasurable but fulfilling at the most profound level, these authors are thwarting some of the most troubling teachings of the Catholic Church.

An important aspect of this novel that separates it from the previously mentioned texts is the strong community of women that provides spiritual nourishment for the individual. Since the fracturing of the female population played an important role in the restriction of women’s social freedoms in the past, the reunification of women is an important aspect of the restoration of women’s sexuality as a whole. The emotional bonds of “les filles” allow each to experience her sexuality in a safe and loving environment.

The tone of Marie-Claire Blais’ *L’Ange de la Solitude* reflects a maturation of the writing of post-Quiet Revolution Québec: turning away from the pessimistic derision with which she treated traditional Québec in *Une Saison dans la vie d’Emmanuel*, Blais instead earnestly questions the common assumption of heterosexuality and the resulting construction of the

family: husband, wife, children. Blais' refusal of the heterosexual imperative demands a revision of the historically accepted institutions of maternity and matrimony, as well as the construction of the family. *L'Ange de la Solitude* rejects these assumptions by allowing for the possibility of a community of women living almost entirely independently of men. The artistically driven women of this novel explore both sexual and platonic relationships with each other, and although there is no overt suggestion that men are unnecessary in this world, Blais seems to be testing the hypothesis that another kind of relationship is possible aside from the accepted man-woman couple. Blais' radical refusal of the heterosexual hierarchy reflects Wittig's theory that the labels of "male" and "female" are constructed entirely by society, and that there is no "natural" sexual hierarchy; the designation of "woman" (like that of "wife") is a political one, not a biological one (359). Eliminating the male role from the picture allows these women to discover themselves and each other in ways that have not been possible in the oppressive, patriarchal world of Catholicism. The result is a space where the women's languid, sensual encounters are nourished, as in the opening scene of the book:

Et Polydor se laissait bercer par cette voix si chaude de Doudouline, car Doudouline était là, doucement répandue sur les genoux de Polydor, sa rose opulence au repos, et Polydor la contemplait de ses yeux épris, enfin elle était là, assise dans ce creux de fraîcheur des genoux de Polydor, inclinant sa tête blonde, et Polydor demandait en glissant des morceaux de chocolat entre ses lèvres: - On n'est pas bien là, entre nous? (25)

The image borrows elements from stereotypical images of lesbianism: two women lounging, cuddling, and feeding each other chocolate. Those elements of sexual relationship that are often accepted as typically feminine are here in abundance: conversation, loving caresses, food used as



a sensual medium of communion. Yet the women of *L'Ange de la solitude* do not fit the images of lesbianism offered by masculine popular culture. The women of Blais' novel exist only for each other, and the lack of masculine gaze differentiates this moment between Polydor and Doudouline from numerous other images in which the sensuality of two women exists for the pleasure of the male imagination.

Heterosexual encounters appear in Blais' text as seedy trysts that interrupt the novel's soul-satisfying presentation of homosexuality. L'Abeille, the painter of the group, participates in heterosexual encounters with random men only as a way of expressing her artistic frustration and self-hatred. These men are seen by the other girls only in terms of the role that they play in l'Abeille's destructive behavior: "Bon, l'Abeille est encore avec un homme, un voyou sans doute, qu'elle a rencontré sur son chemin, tout ce qui se ramasse à cette heure-là dans un parc ombreux" (27). L'Abeille nonetheless participates willingly in these encounters, and her passivity suggests that her participation is a way of deadening her senses and avoiding her creative work, rather than out of any real sexual desire toward the men:

Lorsqu'un homme lui ouvrit la porte de sa voiture, elle monta près de lui, se laissa mollement prendre dans ses bras, il ne pouvait en être autrement...mais elle avait oublié de nourrir le chat avant de sortir, et le tableau, le tableau était toujours inachevé dans le salon. (27)

Whereas she is only superficially involved with these men, her relationship with Paula is described as "baignant dans une intimité" (37), and this intimacy extends not only to her physical desire but also to her love for art:

[I]mperturbable dans son énergie créatrice, elle avait peint en quelques minutes, de ses pinceaux vigoureux, deux panneaux d'une mer méditerranéenne dans

lesquels l'Abeille avait la sensation d'être engloutie, car ces doigts de Paula qui avaient malaxé les couleurs bleues et ocre, qui avaient peint le ciel bleu, les vagues étincelantes, avait aussi pétri la nuque, les épaules de l'Abeille, rechauffé le bas de ses reins. (48)

Just as Paula's hands give both creative inspiration and sexual pleasure, the women's bodies play sacred roles in this text, for they provide sexual and spiritual fulfillment. L'Abeille fondly remembers her ex-girlfriend Thérèse "étendue sur le dos parmi ses coussins comme si elle eût posé pour Goya, toute nue dans cette lumière confinée des hivers dont elle émergeait, si vaste, avec, sur les lèvres, ce sourire de tendresse moqueuse que l'Abeille avait peint" (61). The description of Thérèse's body as "vaste" suggests the sensual importance of the body in this community where corpulence is an asset to pleasure.

Closely linked with the body, food is equated with sensuality and sex in this world where Paula feels equally free to express herself in bed or in the kitchen, for both are sacred places: "comme au lit où elle était toujours sereine, la cuisine est un lieu sacré" (59). Because of the sensual value of food, when Doudouline begins to lose weight, Polydor fears that she is becoming an ascetic: "une femme qui ne mange pas est une femme sans désirs" (54). Paula is so overwhelmingly sensual in her eating habits that l'Abeille is a bit afraid of her: "[E]lle eût peur soudain de celle qui mangeait des fruits de mer encore vivants, des porcs, des veaux à peine nés et des agneaux" (64).

As in the case of Johnie's ex-girlfriend Lynda, a sexual encounter with a man is seen as an act of treason against the warm and cohesive atmosphere of the love-nest, a literal "invasion" of the group, and a much greater treason than infidelity with another woman:

Mais cette fois Lynda avait sérieusement désobéi: elle avait amené un homme, pas un étudiant, à la maison; le rasoir oublié sur la table de chevet était le symbole insolent de cette invasion masculine...et Lynda avait été transpercée par ce corps viril exultant sa victoire jusqu'au cri de l'orgasme. (40)

Sexuality between a man and a woman appears in this text not as the “norm” as much of conventional society would have it, but as a way of betraying one’s true nature and quieting the more profound, individualistic impulses that threaten to manifest themselves. It is love between two women—not between a man and a woman—that provides the means to achieve true self-knowledge and self-acceptance. The women of *L’Ange de la solitude* experience the sacred through their passionate friendships with each other and their mutual artistic encouragement.

The spiritual richness that permeates the lives of “les filles”, which puts them in touch with the very essence of life, has nothing to do with the religion from which they have been rejected due to their sexual orientation. It is instead in their daily sensual communion with each other that they find divinity and spiritual fulfillment. There exists a great and irreparable chasm between traditional religious practice and the more immediate spiritual experience of “les filles”:

Lorsqu’il leur arrivait de sortir, ce n’était pas pour aller lire les théologiens, à la bibliothèque...mais pour piaffer dans ces cours pleines des déchets de l’hiver, reniflant ces premiers effluves du printemps qui feraient bientôt éclore les fleurs.  
(45)

This kind of naturalistic spirituality is in direct opposition to what is referred to in the text as “l’Église la plus bête, la plus intolérante, là où saint Thomas d’Aquin vous suit encore dans la chambre à coucher, où une confrérie de pénis décide si oui ou non nous devons avoir des enfants” (133). The rejection from the Church nevertheless stays with “les filles,” despite their

open derision of Catholicism and everything it stands for. Polydor wants to warn l'Abeille that she is constantly "accompagnée de ces témoins gênants... saint Thomas d'Aquin, les Pères de l'Église, l'Inquisition et ses juges... partout la liberté de l'Abeille et de ses semblables était compromise, sacrifiée" (45). Polydor's words in this passage recall those of Antonine Maillet's epic character La Sagouine, who mocks her priest's mistrust of all women, including his own mother:

Il a ben dit des fois que les femmes étiont des occasions de péché et qu'i' fallit s'en méfier. Tous les prêtres l'avont dit. Y en a même l'un d'entre z-eux qui se méfiait de sa mère... Ah! une femme est tout le temps une femme, qu'i' disait, l'évêque. Et c'est yelle qui a coumis la première faute au paradis terrestre. (114)

Evoking the Church's constant suspicion of the female sex, and especially of homosexual sex, the girls' lusty enjoyment of each other's bodies is a way of rejecting that Church that rejected them first, and building a sensual and spiritual life upon the ruins of that rejection. Sexuality becomes for them "une activité ordinaire de la vie, comme manger ou boire du vin" (47). Just as they experience their spirituality in dirty mud puddles and the scent of the imminent spring, "les filles" integrate their sexuality into their daily lives so that it is no longer a sordid, unhealthy activity but instead an unquestioned expression of their individual spiritual selves.

The "deviant" spirituality experienced by the girls of *L'Ange de la solitude* is not without pain; the character of Gérard illustrates the difficulty of living outside the accepted rules of society. So intensely aware of the universe around her and of the uncertainty of existence that she is incapable of sleeping peacefully, she takes drugs and sniffs cocaine to ease her hypersensitivity to what she sees as imminent doom in the world around her:

[L]a planète se consumait seule avec ses trous de feu, ses guerres larvées ou géantes...et bientôt nous n'aurions pas même assez d'eau pour vivre tant la terre avait été brûlée, ne laissant parmi les cendres des champs stériles que des ombres d'hommes, de femmes, d'enfants que décimait peu à peu cette autre guerre, la famine. (77)

The love and sensual pleasures found with her girlfriends are not sufficient to save Gérard from her nihilistic thoughts, and a fatal mix of drugs and alcohol prevents her escape from an apartment fire. The poem recited by Polydor at an impromptu memorial service suggests both the beauty and the ephemeral quality of the friendship between the girls: “Où t’es caché, Ami, / Toi qui me laisses dans les gémissements? / Pareil au cerf tu as fui, / M’ayant navré après Toi, / Je sortis criant et Tu étais parti” (157). The change brought about by Gérard’s death, as well as the intense love among the other girls, underscores the importance of the community over the individual in this text. “Les filles” find strength in their relationships with each other, and the loss of one of them affects each immeasurably. Those who have sexual relationships with each other are bound in other ways as well, and even the platonic bonds among these friends vibrate with profound sensuality.

The intense relationships between Blais’ characters and the cohesiveness found in her text claim literature as a gynocentric arena; although not all of her texts are as exclusively feminine as this one, it is clear that she has rejected the traditional view of women as accessory to the male existence. This viewpoint resonates with the almost exclusively female images of sexual identity depicted by the more radical Louky Bersianik’s: her two major works, *Le Pique-nique sur l’Acropole* and *L’Euguélienne* present relationships between women, both sexual and platonic, as indispensable to a woman’s spiritual life. “La femme en tant qu’individu est un non-

sens,” she writes (*L'Euguélienne* 359), meaning that a woman's existence is largely dependent on other women; this idea of unity among women is central to both of her texts. It is in the framework of female friendship and conversation that *Le Pique-nique sur l'Acropole* brings the mysterious realm of female sexuality into the limelight. This sexuality is not dealt with individually but collectively as Bersianik stresses the importance of women sharing their sexual experiences—whether positive or negative—with the other women in their lives.

Both *Le Pique-nique sur l'Acropole*, a satirical rewriting of Plato's *Symposium*, and *L'Euguélienne*, which satirizes the Bible, present women characters who reevaluate their identities, necessitating a reimagining of their sexual lives. The women of Bersianik's texts are larger-than-life, mythical, allegorical figures who turn modern Western society's values on their heads, and the very structure of these texts refuses to fit the usual, linear form of the novel: *L'Euguélienne* follows the Biblical form of chapter divisions, and *Le Pique-nique sur l'Acropole* mixes narrative text with drawings and ads borrowed from modern consumer culture, as well as quotes from modern feminist thinkers. Bersianik's writing style gives her texts a structure that more closely resembles a spider-web: one central story with many smaller threads that connect to one another, all of which are of great importance to the overall integrity of the text.

Implicit in Bersianik's two revolutionary texts is the refusal of the notion that a woman who owns her sexuality is, in fact, not a “real” woman. In the same way that society rejects women who claim their intellectual capacities as “bas bleus” or “intellectuelles” which has the same diminutive ring as “poetesse,” women who claim ownership of their sexuality are exiled from our hierarchical society as either prostitutes or frigid.

Having descended to earth from her native planet in search of “le mâle de mon espèce,” the title character of *L'Euguélienne* wages war against the traditional view of women's sexual

identities. Although her search for a partner is not successful, the message that l'Euguélienne brings to Québécois women compels the latter to recreate their positions in life. Proposing an intricate link between spiritual life and self-knowledge, l'Euguélienne teaches her “disciples” that rejection of one’s sexual life is paramount to rejecting oneself, thus positing herself as a role model for the downtrodden women of Québec for whom she appears as a beacon of sexual confidence and freedom:

Son pas prenait naissance à la hanche et non au genou. L’amplitude de ce pas émanait du sexe en mouvement...Elle s’étendit sur le dos et entourait la terre de son bras gauche, l’appuyant sur son sein gauche dont le bout était érigé, l’appuyant aussi sur sa main droite, elle-même appuyée sur son sein droit dont le bout sans doute était aussi érigé. (20)

The unapologetic nature of l'Euguélienne’s sexuality is inseparable from all other aspects of her identity. Her liberating mission places sexual freedom at its fulcrum, as shown in the previous quote in which her erect nipples and undulating hips are focal points of her warm embrace; l'Euguélienne encircles with her enormous, sensual body the Earth that she has come to liberate from its chains.

Bersianik presents sexual love, in Biblical magnitude, as an elixir for all ills, not only those plaguing women but also men. She preaches the elimination of the ancient battle of the sexes by counseling women to reject the notion of the coquette, inciting them instead to be powerful in their sexual interactions: “Soyez des langues de feu qui descendent vers lui et le surprennent et l’inondent de lumière éblouissante et le brûlent au visage et enflamment son corps et son sexe” (299). Such sexual strength is necessary for spiritual transcendence, according to

Bersianik, but the mere physical orgasm is not sufficient. The spiritual “jouissance” is not limited to the clitoris:

Seule la jouissance de l’homme peut être individuelle, localisée; celle de la femme, de la vraie femme, ne peut être que globale, impersonnelle, et même, pourrait-on dire, collective: celle de la féminité tout entière diffusant le plaisir en tranquille clarté jusqu’aux confins du monde... C’est tout le corps de la femme, symbole de tout l’espace qui doit jouir et non une parcelle dérobée au corps de l’homme. (359)

In Bersianik’s universe, however, this passionate sexual satisfaction does not exist within the institution of marriage. Recalling the mythical marriage of Penelope and Ulysses, l’Euguélionne wonders why the sexually frustrated “Penelopes” stay at home waiting for their hero to return, while he is out quenching both his need for adventure and his sexual desire: “Elle s’aperçoit bien vite que son Ulysse endormi est insuffisant à satisfaire ses désirs sexuels. Et pourquoi celui-ci se sent-il en droit de satisfaire les siens ailleurs, alors qu’il ne lui est pas possible à elle d’en faire autant?” (310). In a typical turn of ironic humor, l’Euguélionne quips: “Avez-vous remarqué...qu’Ulysse n’a bandé son arc qu’une seule fois en vingt ans?” (308).

Bersianik’s model for a sexual relationship based on equality appears in the idyllic physical love between Omicronne and Migmaki. Having left her loveless and abusive marriage to follow l’Euguélionne, Omicronne finds peace with a loving man who views her as an equal partner. Bypassing the institution of marriage, the two consummate their relationship in a public ceremony of sexuality that validates the importance of sexual equality. Migmaki and Omicronne’s shared nudity symbolizes their equal vulnerability in the sexual relationship, a dynamic that many of the on-lookers find shocking. Omicronne’s husband, who has joined the



crowd, is shocked to observe Migmaki's attraction to this woman whom he sees as little more than a servant. In the universe of Bersianik's text, the sexual equality enjoyed by Omicronne and Migmaki is a rare one; in the overwhelming majority of couples the male views the sexuality of his female partner as a possession. The public blossoming of Omicronne's sexuality comes as a spiritual catharsis, allowing her to at last be in touch with that part of her essential identity that is hers alone, if she will claim it. In this text, most women are ashamed to admit that they are sexual beings, so the positive sexual awareness that l'Euguélonne expresses from an early age appears as an anomaly: "[J]'éprouve depuis ma naissance la sensation d'avoir un sexe féminin, avec des entrées et des sorties secrètes, un sexe fleuri en forme de nymphéa qui réagit sous ma main et sous celle d'autrui " (359).

L'Euguélonne refuses the bilateral view of female sexuality that denigrates the female sexual organs while glorifying purity: "Et je remercie le Hasard cosmique d'être née femme...J'ai souventes fois examiné mon sexe et je l'ai trouvé beau. Et j'ai souventes fois joui de mon sexe...et j'ai trouvé que cette jouissance était *incomparable*" (359). The positive sexual identity presented by Bersianik creates a space for a gratifying sexual identity that not only is compatible with spirituality, but leads to a deeper overall knowledge of oneself.

In the end, the success of l'Euguélonne's mission consists in inciting Québécois women to reclaim their sexuality and to refuse the patriarchal world's validation of the dynamic of powerful men and submissive women. Instead of this sexual hierarchy that places women at a disadvantage in their relationships with men, Bersianik offers the possibility of a female sexuality that allows women to reach new levels of self-discovery, both physical and spiritual, in their own lives. L'Euguelionne is seeking this form of sexuality in her search for the "mâle de son espèce," and Bersianik gives a positive example of a female character who has had a taste of

such an experience in her own life: the character Exil. In the midst of her fulfilling sexual relations with a man, Exil experiences a kind of spiritual elation:

Quand enfin il éjaculait en moi, il ouvrait des portes de plus en plus reculées de ma conscience. Et ma conscience était alors Joie pure, Jouissance pure, et parfois c'était sans violence et sans acuité soudaine, Jouissance alors étonnamment lointaine, étonnamment haute. (169)

In this sense, female sexuality is greatly valorized in Bersianik's work as an important step towards greater self-awareness. Instead of creating a polarization between women's virtue and their sexuality, she recognizes that they are in fact inseparable, for: "Quand le clitoris va, tout va!" (360). Despite her ongoing search for "le mâle de son espèce," l'Euguélienne avoids placing heterosexual relationships above other sexual relationships: "Lesbienne, homosexuelle, bisexuelle, hétérosexuelle, pansexuelle? Qu'est-ce que c'est que cette panoplie...? Ce qui compte pour moi, c'est d'être sexuelle. La façon importe peu" (370). L'Euguélienne rejects the traditional (and Christian) division between the body and the spirit, instead placing sexuality at the core of human existence. This destructive division "was accomplished during the transition away from the Great Goddess towards a Father God. For how could she be supplanted unless that fundamental knowledge of our birth was abstracted into symbolism? *We are born of women, but we must be born again*" (Elder xxiii). In Bersianik's universe spiritual transcendence is no longer a vague abstraction, but a result of the integration of all aspects of her person, most importantly that of her sexuality.

Whereas sexuality is but one of many elements of modern life that women must recognize and validate in l'Euguélienne's universe, *Le Pique-nique sur l'Acropole* (1979) emphasizes the primordial importance of this theme, bearing witness to the increasing awareness

of women's sexuality in Québécois literature. Bersianik's rewriting of Plato's *Symposium* is essentially a literary exploration of female sexuality. Bersianik discards all taboos regarding the frank discussion of sexuality by writing about women characters who are willing to unveil their sexual lives in the most intimate fashion. They share, accept and counsel each other freely, and they all come to a deeper understanding of themselves and each other.

The strong mythical tone of this text does not imply that Bersianik neglects the more material physical aspects of women's historical oppression. Rather, Bersianik seems to see the physical and the symbolic as having a great deal to do with one another. Of those quotes appropriated by Bersianik for her text, many suggest a deep correlation between the intellectual and the physical struggles of all women, such as this quote attributed to Isabel Barreno:

“L'homme s'approprié tout le code reproducteur, et le corps de la femme se trouve décodifié, flottant dans un espace vide” (83). The many quotes that Bersianik inserts between the pages of her text—sometimes on blank pages, sometimes accompanied by a drawing or other image—often defend a blossoming female sexuality that remains under attack, as shown in this quote from Betty Dodson: “En ne cachant pas que nous nous masturbons, nous mettons au défi ceux qui ont intérêt à maintenir la répression et ceux qui se font complices du silence” (120).

Bersianik reminds the readers that female sexuality is a plural entity, and the sexualities to be discussed encompass “la tienne la mienne la nôtre, celle des femmes de toutes les femmes. Sans oublier les petites filles.” (97). Sexuality may include sex with a man, but also with a woman, and perhaps most importantly sex with oneself: the often taboo subject of masturbation holds a special place of honor in this arena, appearing as a way of exploring oneself and regaining self-awareness: “Je me caresse...Pour savoir si je suis encore vivante” (113). It is a way of experiencing one's sexuality in a self-contained, satisfying way that does not entail the

inevitable complexities of sex with another person. “La masturbation en soi,” says Édith, “est excellente et on devrait la pratiquer comme relation privilégiée avec soi-même” (121), and Aphélie’s entirely positive description of her experience of self-stimulation is in direct opposition to her sexual encounters with her husband, which bring on inexplicable and terrifying flows of blood. When she masturbates, as she often does in her husband’s absence, Aphélie enjoys the pleasure of her sexuality and becomes reacquainted with the many parts of her complex body: “Je caresse mon sexe de femme, mon clitoris, ma hampe, mes petites lèvres, mes grandes lèvres, mon pubis, mes poils, mon pénis, ma vulve, mon vestibule, mon vagin...alouette et libellule” (113).

The Church, of course, would consider Aphélie’s self-love to be “disordered”, as it does with any sexual activity that has pleasure, rather than procreation, as its primary purpose (Grabowski 115). Aphélie’s sexuality becomes glorious and pure; her detailed description of her orgasm is completely free both of the bleeding and of the shame that she clearly experiences in her sexual relations with her husband: “Mon corps ne saigne jamais quand c’est moi qui lui fais l’amour...et il vient bien plus vite à l’orgasme qu’avec un homme, et ça ne rate jamais” (115). Bersianik does not fail, however, to present the other side of this argument, thus refusing to vilify all men; Epsilon points out that “on a de la sexualité des hommes des idées aussi erronées que celle qui ont eu cours pendant longtemps sur la sexualité des femmes” (131).

The theme of homosexuality arises upon Aphélie’s admission of sexual dissatisfaction in her relationship with her husband. “Un autre homme...a sur toi des effets paralysants puisque tu nous as dit que tu ne parvenais pas facilement à l’orgasme avec un partenaire...Une femme ne te ferait pas saigner...et si cela arrivait, elle n’aurait pas ‘horreur de ton sang’” (121). Édith goes so far as to question the purpose of coupling with a man, except for the express purpose of

reproducing: “Je crois que la majorité des femmes qui se contentent de faire l’amour avec les hommes restent dans l’ignorance de leur haut potentiel érotique, parce que les hommes ne savent pas ce que c’est que le plaisir et ils ne savent pas faire durer le désir, ils ne savent que l’anéantir” (122). A sexual relationship with a woman, Édith claims, is the only true path to sexual fulfillment for a woman. This validation of lesbianism as a path to not only physical but emotional and spiritual fulfillment repudiates the historical heterosexism of the Church.

Bersianik’s presentation of lesbianism as not only equal but preferable to a sexual relationship with a man appears as an attempt to “level the playing field” in a society where those women who choose lesbianism are marginalized or excluded from the discussion. In addition to exalting the experience of physical desire for other women, lesbianism as it appears in Bersianik’s text also represents a “prise de position politique visant à mettre un terme à la domination phallique” (Dupré 135). Domination of the phallus, certainly, but also heterosexual domination: lesbianism offers a choice that allows women to avoid the phallogocentric focus of a heterosexual relationship.

The conversation of Bersianik’s diverse group of women explores personal experiences of sexuality but also delves into more serious issues: the character of Adizetu is based on a real child (139), a seven year-old West African girl who is forced to undergo a clitoridectomy. A wise friend counsels her to “ne pas laisser les femmes s’asseoir sur mon estomac et me tenir les jambes écartées et me bâillonner la bouche le nez et les oreilles pour m’empêcher de crier pendant que la femme du forgeron m’enlèverait mon sexe de femme avec un rasoir” (139). This ritual act, says Epsilon, is “une espèce de viol de mineures institutionnalisés! La négation unilatérale d’un sexe sur tout un continent” (148). This violent crime against women, Édith

would say, comes from the lack of a true male equivalent to the clitoris, his “incomplétude” in this sense:

Mais au lieu de le rendre modeste, cette constatation lui fait voir le clitoris d’un mauvais œil, voire d’un œil critique: il trouve ce clitoris bien gênant...pour lui !  
 Ou bien il l’excise, ou bien il l’ignore, ou encore il assimile ce précieux organe à la peau insignifiante de son prépuce et il déclare que les femmes sont castrées !  
 (123)

The cruel act of clitoridectomy hence becomes the physical and violent manifestation of the historical fear of women’s sexuality, and the desire of the patriarchal powers to eradicate this sexuality. A “blessure symbolique”, a “humiliation” in the eyes of men, it is in fact a “blessure réelle, mortelle pour la sexualité” for the women who are forced to go under the knife. It is a real manifestation of the power of women’s sexuality, and the fear inspired by that sexuality, and thus the clitoridectomy continues to stunt this sexuality in regions of the world where it is accepted. The honest discussion that takes place in *Le Pique-nique sur l’Acropole* encourages women to refuse this kind of treatment by educating themselves about their own sexuality and claiming this power for their own good.

The full implication of the act of removing the physical site of sexual pleasure is made clear in the dedication of this second section of the text: “à la petite Adizetu / qui vit en Afrique noire / et qui ne montera / jamais au paradis” (107). In the French terminology, woman’s orgasm is equated with ascension into heaven, so that there is no textual separation between the woman’s sexual organs and her spirit. A removal of the former results in a deadening of the latter, for the sexually liberated woman no longer sees her body as a necessary evil but as a gateway to a more profound and complete form of learning. She “goes to heaven” in the symbolic sense not to seek

salvation and purity, but to gain self-knowledge and insight. Patriarchal law—like that of Adizetu’s world—is capable not only of wounding the woman’s body but also stunting her spiritual growth.

These authors’ validation of the existential and intangible side of female sexuality is an important contribution to the changing face of modern spirituality. An understanding of the divine that includes sexuality is alien to the Catholic tradition, for sexual expression has long been considered an obstacle to the divine, and female sexuality has been vilified since the dawn of that religion. The Church has proven itself not only suspicious but frankly opposed to women’s sexual pleasure (despite Grabowski’s enthusiastic contention that “emerging evidence that orgasm may actually heighten female fertility” has recently increased clerical interest in female pleasure during sex [142]). The redefining of women’s sexuality in these novels suggests that a profound exploration of this arena is necessary if our understanding of the mystical aspects of human existence is to expand to encompass the female gender. The physical body and its desires, according to these authors, must be reintegrated into women’s existential experience, even if this integration occurs initially in an unexpectedly non-feminist manner (such as Héloïse’s slipping from convent to brothel with little recognition of the consequences thereof). Women are beginning to become aware of the true implications of their sexuality, which are far from limited to the physical realm: “sa libido est cosmique, comme son inconscient est mondiale” (Cixous 50).

The exploration and validation of female sexuality in post-Quiet Revolution Québécois texts point not only to new identities for women in Québécois society but also to a new conception of spirituality and of the divine for men and women alike, not only in Québec but around the world. In breaking free from the dualistic idea that the body is separate from the more

“sacred” elements of human existence, these authors encourage a new definition of the spiritual or divine. In the same way that “[w]omen’s writing cannot occur without reference to the female body” (Gould 44), neither can a modern spiritual construct that is appropriate for women. This consciousness of the complete self that is emerging in the works of Québécois women writers gives women access at last to an image of the divine, for it is no longer outside them but within them.



## **Chapter 4**

### **Maternity**

Of all the creative impulses encouraged by Western society, the impulse to procreate is both one of the most powerful and one of the most confusing in terms of its significance for women in Catholic history. Maternity is something of a double-edged sword in terms of women's history, especially in Québec, for while it appears to provide them with a strong purpose and power, it is used by many as a basis for an essentialist view of women's role in society: "Le christianisme est sans doute la construction symbolique la plus raffinée dans laquelle la féminité...se réserve dans le Maternel" (Kristeva 31). This is especially true in Catholicism where powerful figures like Pope John Paul express the opinion that "motherhood is not an element of what it is to be a woman but rather that motherhood defines womanhood" (Gudorf 273). Rejecting the Church's idea that the only way to spiritual transcendence is by "putting off the works of the female (i.e. sex and reproduction) and becoming spiritually male," (Ruether 30) the authors that I will be studying in this chapter—Anne Hébert, Louky Bersianik and Jovette Marchessault—explore the uniquely female realm of maternity as a possibility for spiritual enlightenment rather than a prison of biological necessity. The realm of maternity is explored by these authors both in its physical sense as well in a symbolic sense, as in "spiritual" or metaphysical mothers. In other words, while biological maternity may appear as a site of spiritual fulfillment, there appear in these texts figurative "mothers" who fill the maternal role as well. Apparently convinced that motherhood and spiritual fulfillment are in fact not mutually exclusive, these Québécois women writers of the post-Quiet Revolution period are searching for a harmonious way to bring them together.

While breaking, as Hélène Cixous calls them, “les vieux circuits” of expectations, these women are heeding her call to “de-mater-paternalisons plutôt que, pour parer à la recuperation de la procréation, priver la femme d’une passionnante époque du corps” (52). That is not to say that these writers, or Cixous for that matter, would do away with a rich experience of maternity. Cixous would in fact say that this is impossible, for the Mother is always present, symbolically if not physically:

*Femme pour femmes*: en la femme se maintient la force productive de l’autre, en particulier de l’autre femme. *En* elle, matricielle, berceuse-donneuse, elle-même sa mère et son enfant, elle-même sa fille-sœur... Dans la femme il y a toujours plus ou moins de la mère qui répare et alimente, et résiste à la separation, une force qui ne se laisse pas couper, mais qui essouffle les codes. Nous re-penserons la femme depuis toutes les formes et tous les temps de son corps. (44)

Québec has not historically valued the metaphorical figure of the mother, however, preferring the physical mother who provided workers for the farm and citizens for the province. Because of the great need for labor, the mother’s powers of procreation were highly valued in this agricultural society, and until recently it was not unusual for Québécois women to have upwards of ten children. While it may be a slight exaggeration to say, as did the author of the 1991 article of the same title in *The Economist*, “Quebeckers are dying out,” it is clear that the Québécois population has long been a source of concern for this society: “The ‘revenge of the cradle’ remained Quebec’s primary defense against assimilation for two centuries” (Schuster 64). The obsession with preserving Québécois culture has naturally bled over into the area of maternity, more recently taking the form of financial subsidies up to \$8,000 paid to mothers of

new babies. This political desire to increase Québec's strength by increasing its population has had the result of raising the already idealized institution of maternity to the level of divinity. The ideology of natality only served to reinforce Québec's narrow view of a woman's value:

The traditional 19<sup>th</sup> century social structure, whose values still officially dominated Québec in the 1950's, had been built around the family, with its large numbers of offspring who represented, in a most concrete way, the means of survival for the Québec francophone community. The family, centered on the life-giving mother, played such an essential role that the maternal figure was idealized in literature as the emblem of this traditional order. And when Québec writers began to express their rejection of this order, their condemnation was, in many instances, directed against this mother figure, now seen as a source of repression and a barrier to change. (Lewis 127)

The figure of the Mother pervades most ancient religions, but Christian mythology begins with a curse on the mother: in accepting the counsel of the serpent—an ancient symbol of divine maternity—Eve launches a battle between the spiritual Mother and the spiritual Father: “Eve breaks the ‘patriarchal’ ban and listens to the serpent, the symbolic figure of the mother goddess... [then] there is the curse against the serpent, that is, against the mother goddess herself” (Markale 7). The first book of the Bible thus sets the tone for the submission of the Mother figure to the Father figure: the mother is no longer seen as divine in her own right, becoming instead a biological function to fulfill the will of the Father. After all, it is always the male divinity who is inspired to create (most famously in the previously mentioned cases of Genesis and the Immaculate Conception). The “divine” mother as she appears in the Bible is merely a vessel for the inspiration of the male divinity. Eve's divine birth from the rib of her

future spouse is undertaken entirely by the Father; the Mother is not only unimportant in this Creation story, she is nonexistent. The Virgin Mary also has little to do with the conception of her son: the Immaculate Conception making her more a vessel for the Father's divine will than an active participant in Christ's creation. The reader senses that Mary is an innocent bystander in the conception, as bewildered by this unlikely act as anyone else. These appropriations of maternity by the masculine deity may be seen as the "narcissisme primaire" as described by Kristeva (31), a clear tactic to refuse women the only power that they have consistently wielded in any modern society.

Although idealized as the populator of the province, the figure of the mother has been reduced to the sum of her biological parts and has also been seen as physically and spiritually unclean. Following the commandments put forth in the book of Leviticus, women should be treated as "unclean" for a month after giving birth to a male child (and twice that long if the child is female), and must be "reconciled" with the Church before being buried. This rite is intended to purify the frightening blood issued from the woman, and—again following God's law as presented in Leviticus—Church leaders banned intercourse with pregnant women (Ranke-Heinemann 25). Menstruation likewise inspired fear on the part of men, as having been passed down from Eve as a result of her original sin (Ruether 101).

These profoundly negative associations with maternity led many women writers to reappropriate the maternal role, either rejecting it or reformulating it to fit their more progressive purposes, protesting the "maternal imperative" by emphasizing a woman's individuality over her biological ability to reproduce. This rejection of the maternal imperative does not, however, exclude the possibility of a fulfilling maternal experience (whether physical or metaphorical

appears to be of little importance; the maternal relationship can exist without biological ties).

With these changes in the maternal role comes a reformulation of the family:

La société des années 1960, d'une part orientée vers un pays possible et, d'autre part, pressée de se défaire de ses racines, assiste à la désintégration du noyau familial, qui n'est plus perçu comme un bastion contre les attaques extérieures, mais comme un lieu fermé étouffant l'enfant. (Greif 22)

This constraining view of the family and specifically of motherhood is what Québécois writer Nicole Brossard seeks to destroy in saying that she “killed the womb”; what she truly wants to kill is not the womb but “the representation of woman as object for male pleasure and as reproductive factory” (Mezei 901). Brossard, along with the writers that I will be discussing, seeks to reinvent maternity as a site of spiritual and personal fulfillment. This reinvention cannot happen, however, without a look back at the stultifying history of maternity in Québec and its negative effect on Québécois women’s spiritual growth. The image of Maria Chapdelaine is fixed in the Québécois national conscience, the ideal of female passivity “sitting by her window, watching, waiting, being acted upon” (Mezei 901). A new image of womanhood and motherhood must be created, and the feminist writers of post-1960 Québec create “alternative Marias who speak and write out of their language, dreams and bodies,” including new mothers who refuse to efface their own identities in favor of the maternal role (Mezei 901).

In refusing women a central role in some of the most important births of Christian history, the Church denies their spiritual and creative productivity (Joy et al. 40-48). Although Christianity allows for the creation of a venerated mother—the Virgin Mary—it values her as a vessel for the Messiah’s birth rather than as a divinity herself. Even Jesus himself speaks up to remind Mary that she is not divine but a mere mortal when he reprimands in the book of John:

“Femme, qu’y a-t-il de commun entre toi et moi?” (qtd in Kristeva 33). Mary’s lack of divinity recalls her absence in the spiritual aspect of conception, forming the foundation for a view of motherhood as a largely passive act:

[Mary] was not allowed a share in anything... connected with the natural process of conceiving and bearing a child. She was not allowed to get her only son through the love of a man, it had to be the Holy Spirit... She was not allowed to bear her son in the natural way, because she had to remain intact in childbirth... Thus she was turned into a sort of sexless creature, to a shadow of a wife and mother, reduced to her function in salvation history. (Ranke-Heinemann 345)

This historical stifling of the spiritual and creative aspects of maternity catches women in a double-bind in which their value is largely limited to their capacity to reproduce, yet they are not encouraged to truly experience the power of the maternal role. Luce Irigaray proposes strong relationships between women—maternal and otherwise—as an antidote to the male God’s “murder of the mother”: “[W]omen need a God in the feminine and one way of fostering spirituality in women is by strengthening the mother-daughter bond... this search for female images of the divine is obviously vital if women are to have a sense of their own self-worth” (qtd in Ingman 23).

Whether biological mothers or not, many of the mothers that we find in texts of the post-Quiet Revolution wield a strong spiritual influence over their daughters. The purely spiritual—rather than biological—mother appears in numerous texts as a manifestation of all of the positive aspects of the maternal relationship. Anne Hébert holds an intermediate position in this literary reevaluation of maternity, both questioning the assumption that women must have children in

order to be fulfilled, and finding within the maternal role—both biological and symbolic—rich spiritual food for Québécois women. “Hébert obviously condemns the patriarchally defined institution of motherhood. At the same time, she affirms and exalts the careful nurturing that a woman may provide whether or not she has physically given birth” (Dufault 190). Hébert reminds her readers that Québec possesses a strong matriarchal lineage that dates back from the first women to sail from France to the New World. In this way she refuses the traditional glorification of paternal lineage:

[Julie de la Trinité] proudly traces her ancestors through the maternal line...In *Les Fous de Bassan*, the spirit of the murdered Olivia finds solace in the company of her dead mothers. And, more recently, in *Le Premier jardin* Hébert’s sympathetic protagonist is herself a mother, and her quest to be reunited with her daughter becomes interwoven with her rediscovery of the lives of her Québécois foremothers. (Green 75)

Mary Jean Green also reminds us that these appearances, in addition to representing the matriarchal ancestry of Hébert’s female characters, recall Hébert’s personal ancestry: “[L]ike her protagonist in *Kamouraska*, the woman who plants ‘the first garden’ in Quebec City—Marie Rollet, wife of Québec’s first official settler, Louis Hébert—is herself one of Hébert’s ancestors” (76). The social importance of maternity in pre-Quiet Revolution Québec is depicted in *Kamouraska*: set in 1839, this text portrays the repressive institution of maternity that will be rejected in the century to come. The mother in this text is conflicted, experiencing both the fleeting elation of maternity and the disappointing lack of power in all other realms of existence; Elisabeth finds pleasure and unprecedented power in her pregnancy: “Je suis enceinte à nouveau. J’aime être enceinte. Cela me donne une importance extraordinaire dans la maison. Antoine se

fait tout petit, étonné, sournois. Ma belle-mère tricote de plus belle” (87). In Elisabeth’s case, maternity not only validates her existence in society but also appeases her violent and abusive husband and quiets her meddling mother-in-law. After giving birth, however, Elisabeth’s enjoyment of her maternal position fades, overwhelmed by “toute cette marmaille à porter et à mettre au monde, à élever au sein, à sevrer... Onze maternités en vingt-deux ans. Terre aveugle, tant de sang et de lait, de placenta en galettes brisées” (11).

The character of Flora Fontanges in Hébert’s *Le Premier jardin* provides a particularly rich example of the valorisation of maternal lineage, as well as the possibility for symbolic maternity in addition to biological maternity. Lacking a biological mother of her own, Flora also lacks any symbolic mothers in her life. The nuns at the orphanage hardly fill the role, nor does her adoptive mother Mme Eventurel, who wants only to mold Marie into a proper Catholic girl and whose mother warns her: “Vous n’en ferez jamais une lady” (30). Once she has become Flora Fontanges, she must come to terms with her own lack of a mother before she can fully own her relationship with her daughter. Like her own artistic identity, Flora’s relationship with Maud must be “lost” before it is “found”. Flora seeks her own unique path for self-discovery, braving her anxiety to search for her daughter and rekindle their lost relationship. In the face of psychologically challenging meetings with her daughter’s friends (including a suggested romantic connection with her daughter’s boyfriend), Flora must muster courage that does not come naturally to her. By assimilating herself to fictional characters, Flora is able to bypass her fear and become the woman that she imagines herself to be, depending on the moment.

Flora’s theatrical powers of self-transformation allow her to become, in a sense, her own spiritual mother. Having given symbolic birth to her new identity as Flora Fontanges, Parisian actress, she creates a rich spiritual life for herself that refuses to be defined by her materially



poor childhood, rediscovering in her return to Québec the powers of transformation that put her in spiritual contact both with her ancestors—the first women of Québec—and with her own identity. The latter is fleeting, however, disappearing when she leaves the theatre, leaving her constantly “en quête d’un autre rôle” (50). The lack of a spiritual mother-figure in her life has made it impossible for Flora to maintain a grounded vision of her own identity: she remains constantly in search of a role that will lead her to her next spiritual revelation.

The name that Marie chooses—Flora—is full of significance for her surfacing identity and symbolizes her choice to define herself on her own terms. Her choice of name is of great significance, “un nom secret, caché dans son cœur, depuis la nuit des temps, le seul et l’unique qui la désignera entre tous et lui permettra toutes les métamorphoses nécessaires de sa vie” (65):

Flora is a pagan name, a rejection of the previous identities inspired by male saints or the Virgin Mother. It also signifies the reproductive organs of the plant and thus represents the affirmation of the female body. Finally, ‘Flora’ suggests the garden and identifies the bearer of the name as a new Eve, capable of starting her own genealogical tree. (Rea 127)

This “tree” that Flora will start replaces the family tree of which she often dreams, being herself without roots:

[L]a petite fille serait-elle l’oiseau unique au faite de cet arbre, bruissant de courants d’air, car déjà elle désire, plus que tout au monde, chanter et dire toute la vie contenue dans cet arbre qui lui appartiendrait en propre comme son arbre généalogique et son histoire personnelle. (124)

Although she lacks a real sense of personal family history, Flora’s act of naming herself is not to be undervalued: with the name Flora, the young Marie gives herself a spiritual and

cultural identity, beginning to shape her personal history not around facts of births and deaths but around generations of women who came before her. It is through these women that she comes to know herself, whether on the stage or on the streets of Québec. Flora recognizes the importance of naming not only herself but also the previous generations of women who are now helping form her identity:

[Flora et Raphaël] ont appelé des créatures disparues, les tirant par leur nom, comme avec une corde du fond d'un puits, pour qu'elles viennent saluer sur la scène et se nommer bien haut, afin qu'on les reconnaisse et leur rende hommage, avant qu'elles ne disparaissent à nouveau. (120)

In creating herself and giving new creative life to these women who came before her, the character of Flora may indeed be read as a modern manifestation of the ancient myth of Eve. The model that she presents, unlike Eve, is one of personal and creative fulfillment, independent of attachments and obligations to men or children. Flora is able to abandon herself entirely to the characters that she embodies, suggesting—as some strains of modern psychology would have us believe—that “transcendence might develop from the ‘polymorphous self’ rather than the integrated self” (Stevens-Long 164). Flora discovers remote parts of her psyche that are otherwise inaccessible, even to her, a more mystical than psychological discovery that calls not on Flora’s intellectual powers but rather on deep layers of her spiritual self.

Lacking—like Eve—a biological mother of her own, Flora nonetheless is able to find maternal influence in her life. As useless as it turns out for her to “chercher parmi les mères du pays la mère qu'elle n'a jamais connue,” she nonetheless finds that the mother she has sought in Québécois history is none but herself (100). It is the actress herself who acts as spiritual mother to the young girl that she once was, as well as to the grown woman who continues to discover

her spiritual identity. Her capacity for self-mothering is perhaps the only thing in her life that prepares her for the birth of her child, a monumental event that proves more dramatic than any of her stage roles and more stirring than any sexual passion:

Sa vraie vie est partout à la fois, dans la joie d'être mère et les mille soucis et bonheurs quotidiens... Elle est énergique et véhémence, en plein milieu de sa vie qui surgit par tous les bouts de son être à la fois. Trop heureuse sans doute pour jouer les malheurs d'autrui, pour pleurer juste et mourir sous les feux de la rampe. Elle n'arrive pas à éclater sur scène avec tout son sang qui bouillonne et se change en larmes. (112)

Reveling in the act of motherhood, Flora is at last content to be only herself, no longer seeking the escapist thrill of the stage. The peaceful state of mind brought about by motherhood appears in fact to be incompatible with her stage success. As her theatrical performances have always fed on her spiritual longing, maternal contentment does not garner Flora acclaim on the stage; her first role after giving birth receives a painfully negative review (111-2). The initial mother-daughter bond is an instinctual and spiritual one, shown by the animal-like behavior of Flora with her newborn:

La mère baigne, talque, linge, berce, caresse sa fille, à longueur de journée. Lui parle comme à un Dieu qu'on adore. La garde le plus longtemps possible tout contre sa poitrine nue, sous une blouse ample... Peau contre peau. Lui donne le sein, sans horaire fixe, comme une chatte qui nourrit son chaton. La lèche de la tête aux pieds... Évitera de se mettre du déodorant et de l'eau de Cologne pour que sa fille puisse la reconnaître plus facilement rien qu'à l'odeur, animale et chaude, perdue dans la campagne, mêlée aux parfums de la terre. (111)

The powerful bond does not last, however, for the “mille petits démons” of Flora’s career invade their intimate relationship, and Flora struggles constantly with the idea of “la bonté maternelle absolue,” finding herself failing in so many ways in the relationship with Maud (100). She seeks a close relationship with her daughter, but Maud’s habit of disappearing without a trace keeps a distance between the two. When at last she returns, the mother-daughter relationship is temporarily healed, heralding a new phase in their relationship. The following description of their reunion evokes the difficulty of maintaining the all-encompassing maternal bond amid the day-to-day occurrences of ordinary life:

[Maud] s’est abattue aux pieds de sa mère... Elle pleure. Elle demande pardon... Elle enserre de ses deux bras les jambes de Flora Fontanges. Elle met sa tête sur les genoux de Flora Fontanges. Voudrait se fondre entre les genoux maternels. Disparaître. Retrouver l’union parfaite, l’innocence d’avant sa première respiration, sur la terre des hommes. (173)

This “union parfaite” sought by both mother and daughter recalls the first days after Maud’s birth, when for once her theatrical career took a second seat to her personal life. Despite the importance of Flora’s career, Flora seeks to rekindle her broken bond with her daughter during her stay in Québec. She must first come to terms with her lack of a name or clear identity, however, for few traces remain of her former lives other than the fragments of her memory and imagination. Her search for Maud reflects her search for her past identity, at times colliding and taking the form of “a quest for self and for the origins of the artist, in a rich and complex *Künstlerroman*” (Rea 120). Having accepted, through the geographical and emotional examination of her life as Marie Eventurel, the irreversible loss of her own childhood, Flora can begin to heal her relationship with Maud, though the mother-daughter relationship will never

again attain its earliest intimacy. Flora mourns for the “amour fou” between her and Maud, the primitive purity of their bond. Years later, when Maud is an adult and at last returns to Québec after her latest fugue, Flora’s desire to capture the precious moment with her daughter incites her to “renouer, encore une fois, les gestes quotidiens qui, depuis quelque temps, l’attachent à sa fille...Flora Fontanges coiffe sa fille pour la nuit et lui fait des tresses de petite fille” (180).

Maud’s constant fugues parallel Flora’s lack of a permanent family, as both women seek—through emotional and physical journeys—an idealized maternal figure. Hébert does not allow the reader the pleasure of a facile resolution to this tension in Flora’s life: despite the reunion of mother and daughter in this text, their relationship is frustrated, filled with difficulty and unrealized dreams. Hébert forces the reader to confront the reality of the relationship, which is not only the blissful “amour fou” of the first moment of motherhood, but also life-long discord and conflict. While Flora’s love for her daughter has not diminished, it has become more and more difficult to achieve closeness with Maud as the latter creates an independent life of her own. Although she finds momentary reconnection with her daughter towards the end of the novel, both Maud and Flora will continue to seek fulfillment in places other than the maternal bond. Having lost track of her daughter, Flora is preoccupied with her performance as “Winnie” in *Oh! les beaux jours* and spends relatively little time seeking out Maud. The daughter’s presence is powerful despite her absence, however: in the communal residence where Maud lives, Flora sees her newspaper clippings that recall Flora’s celebrity and Maud’s discontent as an adolescent. It is no coincidence that the clippings that Maud has tacked on her wall alternate between rave reviews of Flora’s performances and stories of Maud as a runaway of 13 years, then 15, 17, and 18 years old.

While Maud's delinquency may stem from Flora's difficulty in reconciling her stage career with her relationship with her daughter, it also points to the daughter's need to assert her individuality in the face of a strong mother, and in this way may be seen as an important step in the creation of a new maternal pattern for women. Representing "the struggle of the young Québécois to break free from an outmoded traditional ideology," Maud's many forms of flight from the world of her mother's childhood suggest that she herself is breaking free from the past and forging a new identity for herself (Green *The Past* 70-71). The mother-daughter bond is irreparable because the initial, primitive love between the two is inevitably broken by society, despite Maud's insistence that they will never again be separated: "Rassure-toi, ma petite Maman. Rien de mal ne peut plus nous arriver. Je suis ta prisonnière... Je suis vissée ici dedans, les deux pieds enfoncés dans ta moquette" (179). Flora also desires this kind of intense attachment, wanting to renew their bond and keep her daughter from once again escaping her maternal grasp:

Malgré sa fatigue, Flora Fontanges voudrait renouer, encore une fois, les gestes quotidiens qui, depuis quelque temps, l'attachent à sa fille... Pourquoi pas se fier à la force de l'habitude, patiemment tissée autour de Maud, pareille à une fine toile d'araignée, pour la retenir, encore un peu de temps? (180)

Despite Flora's desire to attach herself to her daughter, the successful actress finds herself in the impossibility of experiencing a truly fulfilling career simultaneously with a fulfilling maternal commitment; having been indoctrinated from an early age into the belief that a woman must choose one or the other, she fails to negotiate both worlds. However, while she is unable to be the mother that she would like to be to her daughter, Flora is able to find mothers of her own throughout the text. Previous generations of Québécois women, as well as French women like

Joan of Arc, surface in her imagination to provide spiritual sustenance and creative inspiration. Although Flora never finds a perfect resolution to either her conflicts with Maud or her conflicts with herself, her life's work encourages her to constantly search for the deeper meaning in all things. It is this seeking that has led her away from her Catholic roots, and it is this that leads her to know herself intimately.

The popular thought that the identity of "mother" has been appropriated by—and now belongs to—the masculine realm is given voice in Hébert's text in the statement of bohemian and free-spirited Céleste: "les mères, c'est aussi macho que les gars, c'est bien connu" (24). By setting "les filles" against "les mères," Céleste expresses what many Québécois writers are expressing in recent texts: it is time for Québécois women to take back motherhood from the male institution of the Catholic Church and make it their own, and thus reconnect with the intrinsic power of the position—physical or metaphorical—of being a Mother. Complicit in their own oppression, Québécois women who acted as "guardians" of the Catholic faith are not merely victims but are acting as their own spiritual executioner.

Despite Hébert's presentation of the ambivalence of maternity, she nevertheless maintains the mystical bond between mother and daughter. Traditionally a symbol of spiritual and physical comfort and safety, the figure of the mother is now looked upon with cynicism and suspicion. Hébert's text does not propose a solution to the difficulty of negotiating maternity with a passionate and creative career, nor does she completely rehabilitate the spiritual element of the mother-daughter bond; rather, she poses the problem and asks the reader to consider the complexity of the character's dilemma. The bond between the mother and daughter in this text is threatened by society, leaving Flora desperate to "emmener sa fille avec elle... Vite, avant que Maud ne change d'idée" (175). The desire to retain the strong bond is powerful, but less

powerful than the forces of the outside world that will continue to pull them apart. Like other maternal relationships in these post-Quiet Revolution texts, Flora and Maud find themselves in a difficult place of transition between the old mother-daughter bond of Catholic Québec and a new bond that will allow both to benefit from the relationship.

The dedication of Louky Bersianik's *Le Pique-nique sur l'Acropole* shows the great degree to which the author values the maternal relationship: "à ma mère / à ses sept filles / aux femmes futures et du passé / aux femmes présentes et du présent" (19). Both of her major texts offer a critique of the long-standing refusal of Christian society to allow women to fully experience the power of their maternities (the idea that "the male seed provides the form and active power in procreation, while the female only provides the 'matter' that is formed" [Ruether 94]). She sees this problem as deriving from the view of women as spiritually inferior, from the biological importance given to the sperm, and from the very little importance given to the biological role of the female organs in the act of conception:

Car, en ce dernier cas, où était la femelle gamète? Nous avait-elle filé entre les doigts comme la comète aux longs cheveux, ou était-elle déjà installée, la coquine, dans cette bonne terre femelle qu'on voulait labourer? (246)

Thus the basis for Louky Bersianik's affirmation that the uterus "n'est pas une outre, c'est un atelier de la création corporelle" (Gould 37). Bersianik acknowledges, nonetheless, the difficulty for women—particularly for mothers—to possess their creativity. This portrayal of the mother as a powerful figure is the antithesis of the tradition related by Omicronne that illustrates women's one-dimensional purpose in life by demanding that they die once they have given birth:



Dans notre petite île, dit Omicronne, une très vieille coutume veut que les femmes, quand elles viennent d'accoucher, partent en courant vers la mer, dans de longues robes blanches. Puis, elles se couchent sur la plage, face contre terre, clouent leur main droite dans le sable, et, de l'autre main, tracent une figure et la caressent d'un geste circulaire jusqu'à ce que ce mouvement s'éteigne de lui-même: en réalité, c'est la mort qui est venue l'interrompre. (63)

In her satirical portrayal of Adam as the non-instrumental “vessel” of God in “L’Emasculée Conception,” Bersianik points out the bias in the myth of the Immaculate Conception, and reappropriates the role of maternity as a creative and active act instead of the passive act of the Catholic legend (*L’Euguélonne* 53-54). The difficulty and pain experienced by Adam in this satirical birth lead him to swear off giving birth in the future, with the exception of “enfantements spirituels” (54). Changing the traditional focus of the creation myth, Bersianik suggests that it is Adam, not a sinful Eve, who is guilty of weakness: “l’accouchement fût tellement pénible qu’Adam jura de ne plus jamais recommencer!” (43). Her tongue-in-cheek take on this age-old story allows women to be the heroines of the myth, whose role in motherhood is an active choice made out of courage (courage that Adam lacked) and not because they were punished for their weakness.

In giving the figure of the mother her belated due, Bersianik encourages women to seek out contact with what Nicole Houde would term their “sourcière”: a term that brings together the figures of the wise Witch and the Divine Mother, embracing not only the biological but also the metaphorical mother, the source of one’s identity (Gould 40). While recognizing maternity as a privilege and a right, *l’Euguélonne* nonetheless issues a call to action for women to reject the notion of maternity as a biological necessity:

Femmes de la Terre, enfanter n'est qu'une de vos immenses possibilités. C'est votre privilège, c'est votre droit, mais qui a dit que c'était votre devoir ? Qui vous oblige à enfanter? Qui vous oblige à perpétuer l'espèce? Est-ce que votre espèce est en voie d'extinction? Qui vous oblige à faire regorger l'espèce Humaine de "petits de l'Homme" aux dépens de votre existence de femme? Qui vous oblige à ne faire que ça dans la vie? (288)

The transformation of the maternal theme in Québécois literature necessitates a rethinking not only of the identity of modern mothers but of the mother figures who form the basis for Québécois culture's religious life. The fact that L'Euguélonne herself is born to a man—in a satirical recreation of the Immaculate Conception—introduces Bersianik's position regarding the maternal imperative. "Le poids de vos enfants vous a longtemps retenues à la Terre...Expulsez vos enfants joyeusement de vous-mêmes et lancez-vous dans l'espace aveuglé de soleil" (293). The use of the term "joyeusement" indicates that this rejection is not a negative thing—for mother or for child—but rather a necessary step in the development of both individuals. Bersianik rejects the idea that because they are able to give birth, women have a duty to do so, questioning the need to over-populate the earth to the detriment of women's individuality. The maternal imperative stifles women and prevents them from fulfilling their creative potential: "Vos ailes, femmes de la Terre, ont été enduites de beurre de plomb dès votre naissance. Vous n'avez jusqu'ici osé les ouvrir que parcimonieusement, de crainte que l'on ne vous ordonne de les refermer" (293). L'Euguélonne therefore incites women to become sculptors, artists, poets, lawyers, and doctors rather than accept the identity that has been handed them by a society that does not have their best interests at heart. This does not exclude the possibility of a rewarding motherhood, however. Bersianik's position regarding maternity is akin

to the genre that Gerber refers to as the “maternal *Kunstlerroman*,” a new genre of contemporary fiction in which the mother “imaginatively finds voice, and creates, in and through the very act that culture dictates should silence and efface her, namely her motherhood” (xiv).

For Bersianik, the incessant maternities encouraged by traditional Québécois society turn a woman into a “*Maison Hantée*” whose ghosts “filent comme l’éclair devant ses fenêtres entrouvertes et ce sont les seules éclaircies de cette nuit intérieure grouillante d’une vie de protozoaires et inquiétante comme la mue des lézards” (24). From this creature three categories of children are pulled by a thread, some “vêtus comme des soldats, le fusil au côté,” others “équipés de mitrailleuses,” and a final group of children coming from the womb “à quatre pattes et un seau accroché autour du cou” (25). This symbol of passive maternity takes a stand, however, at last refusing compliance with the system that sends her many children off to the slaughterhouse:

Je suis l’Utérus universel. Voilà des siècles que je suis vomi par ceux-là mêmes qui en étaient sortis tout triomphants. Voilà des siècles que l’on s’empare de mes fruits mûrs pour les mener au pressoir. ASSEZ ! Nous nous mutinons. Nous fermons l’usine où nous fabriquons le sang, où nous dosons les globules rouges et les globules blancs. (26)

Bersianik’s “*Maison Hantée*” thus sets an example for other mothers, calling them to regain control over their powers of reproduction and refuse to be reduced to a factory for children, seen as creatures that are accused “de ne savoir produire que des Enfaons” (38).

As an alternative to the servile reproduction of la “*Maison Hantée*”, Bersianik’s text presents a figure of the divine maternal in the form of “*La Déesse Wondjina*” who plays a central role in l’Euguélienne’s creation story as told by a Québécois theologian. What at first appears to

be a validation of the maternal relationship and a feminist rewriting of the masculine trinity turns out to be a refusal of the Euguélienne's unique birth, as well as a refusal of the maternal divinity; instead of allowing l'Euguélienne her own creation story, she merely fills the role of Jesus Christ as the spiritual daughter of la Mère Éternelle:

[L]'Euguélienne était la Fille Bien-Aimée de la Déesse Wondjina et de la Cerveille Suprême... ces Trois Personnages divins ne faisaient en réalité qu'une seule Déesse: Wondjina la Mère Éternelle, L'Euguélienne la Fille Bien-Aimée, et la Cerveille Suprême la Pensée Divine qui est là pour unir étroitement la Mère et la Fille... L'Une procède de l'autre. La Mère procède de la Fille, la Fille procède de la Cerveille Suprême et la Cerveille Suprême procède de la Mère. (50)

This complicated rendering of her origins merely amuses l'Euguélienne: "L'Euguélienne ne put s'empêcher de sourire. 'Ils sont fous ces Humains!' semblait dire ce sourire" (55).

L'Euguélienne's origins are not to be reduced to the familiar trinity of Christianity, for she already has a role in a creation story, and it is one that has no precedent. In the creation of l'Euguélienne, Bersianik gives women a divine role that they have been lacking in Christian theology.

Bersianik's text makes a clear distinction between divine maternity, in which women are spiritually fulfilled, and the mindless maternity that would turn the female gender into baby factories. Omicronne first appears in the text as exemplifying the latter, her oppressive husband and obligatory maternities leaving her without an identity of her own. She is so separated from her maternal role that she does not even remember how many times she has given births, merely stating, "J'ai accouché deux ou trois fois, je ne sais plus très bien" (63).

Much of the narrative that follows involves Omicronne's search, not only for a name, but for a role-model that will show her what a healthy and spiritually fulfilling motherhood looks like. Returning to her own mother's house proves futile, for like Omicronne she has given up her own identity in order to be a wife and mother. In an unequivocal criticism of the mindless maternity to which Omicronne has submitted, Exil's mother speaks of her own five miscarriages and multiple pregnancies to Deltanu, who has undergone an abortion:

Vois-tu, ces petits que je n'ai pas menés à terme, je ne les voulais pas. Tu sais que j'ai quand même eu dix enfants? Tu sais que ces dix enfants, je les ai élevés? Et que si j'avais eu ces cinq-là, ça m'en aurait fait quinze? Veux-tu savoir combien j'en ai désiré réellement sur ce nombre? (104)

The males express great opposition to the desire to create a divine mother figure, however, when it leads to women having the choice of whether or not to reproduce:

Et le *Primat du Phallus*, alors? Escamoté? Ni vu ni connu? Remplacé par le *Primat de l'Utérus*? Ça jamais! On a sa fierté! Et les *pères*? Que faites-vous des pères? Ils sont là, tout de même! C'est tout de même eux qui "leur font" ces enfants! Ils ont leur mot à dire quand même! C'est un acte contre nature! Le fruit de ses entrailles! Le fruit sacré de son ventre!... La semence du mâle est sacrée! Il ne faut pas la gaspiller! (159)

The affirmation of a Divine Mother must include, therefore, a refutation of this idea that only the male plays a sacred part in the reproductive act. The *Primat du Phallus* must be replaced—or at least accompanied—by "le *primat des seins*, ou le *primat de l'utérus*, ou le *primat du vagin*," creating a divine figure of the maternal to match the long-worshipped masculine deity.

L'Euguélienne reminds her disciples that "*le corps de maman est un émetteur autant qu'un*

*récepteur*,” encouraging them to “divulguer aux jeunes esprits de cette planète [que] ‘l’ovule n’est pas fertilisé par le spermatozoïde (mais que) tous deux contribuent ensemble à un processus qui aboutit à la conception’ ” (247).

Instead of the reduction of maternity to a biological necessity, l’Euguélienne proposes a new mythology that would place the Mother figure on par with the Father figure. She suggests, as a point of departure, a reconsideration of certain aspects of nature as maternal, for example the sun:

[L]e soleil peut être un symbole phallique si l’on considère qu’il se lève et se couche comme le pénis, si l’on considère que sa force est sans pareille, si l’on considère aussi que, sans lui, la Terre serait stérile. Mais, il peut être aussi un symbole maternel si l’on considère qu’il fait croître les plantes, les réchauffe et leur permet d’élaborer l’essentielle chlorophylle; il est féminin si l’on considère sa puissance de rayonnement, sa beauté sans pareille et sa forme ronde. (346)

This adulation of authentic maternity as something that encourages plants to grow is repeated in Bersianik’s refusal of the parenting philosophy of “des rapports de domination et de soumission,” instead asking parents to fight for “des rapports de réciprocité” with their children (378). Maternity appears in Bersianik’s texts as a natural location for the blossoming of the female spirit—both that of the mother and of the child—for all women were born of a mother and knew maternal love before any other love:

Toutes les femmes qui ont été fabriquées dans un utérus connaissent d’abord l’utérus... ce lieu-dit géographique de l’environnement total, lieu où elles sont touchées de partout, ce qu’elles n’oublieront jamais... Elles ont été pressées sur deux seins pressés de répondre à leur faim et de se répandre en elles en bienfait

qui apaise la première angoisse. Elles ont connu leur premier amour au creux de ces mains et de ces seins, eu leur premier orgasme au contact de ce Corps du dedans et du dehors. (*Pique-nique* 55)

While she values maternity as an institution that can provide spiritual sustenance for both mother and child, Bersianik refuses an essentialist view of the institution that refuses childless women an identity as “une vraie femme” and at the same time leaves fathers out of the equation:

[U]n mâle peut être un vrai homme même s’il n’a pas eu d’enfant. Cela voudrait-il dire que la paternité est accessoire, voire inexistante ou calquée sur la maternité? Cela voudrait-il dire que la paternité ne serait qu’un substitut de la maternité et autres babioles du genre [femelle] et qu’en conséquence elle est sans importance et qu’il vaudrait mieux l’oublier pour accéder au stade de l’Homme supérieur? (379)

While encouraging a new vision of parent-child relationships, one that will be a spiritual oasis for both, Bersianik also creates in l’Euguélonne a figure of spiritual maternity that exceeds the bounds of physical parenthood. In her short stay on the planet Earth, l’Euguélonne gives new spiritual life to the women who become her disciples, freeing them from the stifling chains of society. As the Christ figure of the Bible was a manifestation of the heavenly Father, l’Euguélonne represents the heavenly Mother: her wisdom spiritually nurtures her disciples and frees them from the psychic chains that have kept them imprisoned.

Although never bearing children in the physical sense, the character of l’Euguélonne fills the role of metaphorical mother for all of her “disciples,” meaning all earthly women. While *L’Euguélonne* focuses more on the metaphorical mother in *Le Pique-Nique sur l’Acropole*—her satirical rewriting of Plato’s *Symposium*—is more concerned with earthly mothers and how the

relationship can enhance both mother and child. In ending *Le Pique-nique sur l'Acropole* with an image of mother-daughter bonding and healing, Bersianik posits this relationship as a powerful agency of hope for the spiritual future of women. The maternal relationship is not dependent on the biological bond of maternity, however, as shown when Avertine “chooses” the eight year-old Adizetu to play the role of the mother that she lacks. Avertine has spent her life searching for her lost mother, seeking her in mythical figures like “Mater Déméter”: “J’ai rencontré Mater Déméter qui cherchait sa fille et elle m’a dit: il y a si longtemps que ma fille m’a perdue que je ne sais plus si je la reconnaîtrais. Alors je lui ai dit: c’est peut-être moi ta fille, je suis née de mère inconnue” (189). Failing to create a bond with the mythical Demeter, Avertine asks her friends to humor her in filling this need for her, and their willingness to play the role of her mother allows her to experience the spiritual nurturing that she has missed since birth.

The young Adizetu’s turn as Avertine’s mother helps the former to come to terms with her own mother’s shortcomings, for Adizetu’s own mother abandoned her “aux mains qui tiennent les couteaux” (190). Avertine in turn provides the kind of maternal love that will allow Adizetu to begin to heal from her wounds, picking up her symbolic “mère” and cradling her in her arms. Avertine and Adizetu both find a divine mother in the other, and Avertine finds the spiritual strength to turn her maternal questions outward, searching no longer for her own mother but for the Universal Mother:

Il paraît que l’Utérus n’existe plus. Il a été effacé de la surface de la terre. Ce n’est pas normal de penser qu’il existe puisqu’il est invisible. L’enfantement aujourd’hui comme hier est mis au compte de Phallus. Mais qui accouchera de l’Utérus? Il nous faut une sage-femme experte et sage comme la mère de Socrate



pour le mettre au monde! Et voilà ce que je cherche. Les Eaux répandues où sont-elles? (198)

Having found in her friends a replacement for her physical mother, Avertine is able to begin searching for a purely spiritual source that will allow her to be reborn spiritually:

Saviez-vous que je ne suis pas née? Je veux naître à mon tour et c'est pour cela que je me noie dans la rivière Égée, là où elle est enceinte de mes os. Saviez-vous que les poissons ont renoncé à l'air pour vivre dans l'eau? On dit que c'est l'inverse qui nous est arrivé. Mais c'est impossible. Notre milieu naturel c'est l'Eau. Quant à moi je suis insoluble, sauf dans la Mère. (200)

The appendix of this same text is entitled “Maïeutique et la voix comme utérus,” the first term explained by Bersianik as coming from Greek and meaning “l’art de faire accoucher” (211). This appendix is comprised of a series of quotes that Bersianik attributes to Plato and Socrates (though it is she is taking liberties with the references), and all have to do with the supreme importance and symbolism of giving birth. Most of the quotes use the verb “enfanter” in the intellectual or spiritual sense (“Solon jouit chez vous de la même gloire pour avoir *donné naissance* à vos lois, et d’autres en jouissent en beaucoup d’autres pays, grecs ou barbares, pour avoir produit beaucoup d’œuvres éclatantes et *enfanté* des vertus de tout genre: maints temples leur ont été consacrés à cause de ces *enfants spirituels*; personne n’en a obtenu pour *des enfants issus d’une femme*” [213]). Bersianik’s purpose in pointing out these uses of the term is no doubt largely ironic, but also indicates the great cultural importance of the act of giving birth not only physically but spiritually. This is an act that is coveted by men, appropriated for their own use while women’s life-giving capacity is reduced to a biological necessity. Bersianik refuses this

limitation, putting the women of her texts in the powerful position not only of being mothers in the physical sense but—more importantly—in the spiritual sense.

This spiritual aspect of maternity appears in numerous texts of post-Quiet Revolution Québec, explored especially profoundly by Bersianik's contemporary, Jovette Marchessault. Her autobiographical works explore the spiritual dimension of maternity, both in terms of a celestial mother and in the spiritual influence of her physical mother and grandmother. Marchessault's first two novels—*Comme une enfant de la terre* and *La Mère des herbes*—make particular use of the figure of the Divine Mother, showing her in numerous spiritual and physical forms. The narrator of these two texts is, above all, “à la recherche d'une Mère universelle, mère cachée dans les galeries souterraines” (77).

The mythical character of *la Mère des herbes* in the novel by the same name represents “une nouvelle vision mythique de la renaissance spirituelle et de la résurrection de la femme accomplies par la revendication de son héritage matriarcal ancestral et de ses racines sacrées qui remontent à la tradition de la Grande Déesse” (9). As the Divine Mother of all humanity, implying a rejection of God the Father in her “lutte contre les ténèbres, l'enfer du père, le jugement dernier, les convulsions apocalyptiques” (217). Marchessault's “Grande Mère des Herbes” bears a strong resemblance to the figure of Mother Nature, a personification of the spiritual powers within the Earth and within all living creatures:

Dans le ciel, la Mère des herbes engendrait sa flore, tissait sans se presser, des herbes de toutes sortes. Herbes calmantes, fortifiantes pour les coléreux et les angoissés!...Ouais! Ouais! Ouais! La Mère des herbes était en train de mettre au monde ses filles végétales, ses filles vénérées dans ce ciel de Printemps qui suit de peu la semaine de la Passion chrétienne. (42)

This onset of spring has little in common, however, with the purity of the Christian celebration of Easter. La Mère des herbes is considered to be the force behind the changes of the seasons as well as the daily revolution of the Earth around the sun, both of which are met with sensual enjoyment and pleasure, as shown in the narrator's description of transformative powers of one particularly striking dawn:

Son immense pulsation naissante vous absorbe. Absorbe même ce que vous connaissez le plus et le moins en vous-même... L'aube nous embrasse, une fois encore, une fois de plus et les puissances raisonneuses qui nous encombrant toute la journée font un pas en arrière. On se sent comme une âme neuve avec dedans le corps une sorte de satisfaction charnelle. (51)

The narrator's worshipful consideration of this natural phenomenon is inseparable from her spiritual connection with la Mère des herbes, her spiritual mother who makes appearances both in her imagination and through the physical presence of Grand-mère. The narrator's initiation into the practice of herbal remedies brings with it a spiritual revelation of the profundity of this act:

Grand-mère récolte! Louisa cueille avec des gestes millénaires les herbes de la vie perpétuelle... Chaque vie a son nom, son identité, son lieu sur une pierre immobile ou aux abords de l'étang dans l'humidité exaltante d'une nappe d'eau. Chaque fille de la Mère des herbes a son temps irrémédiable d'épanouissement, son temps de rupture. Elle nous le fait comprendre, le désigne du doigt. Elle nous arrête, nous incite à faire tourner nos moteurs au ralenti, à prendre le temps de quitter nos chemins individuels pour regarder ces belles choses vivantes. (76)

The spiritual connection with la Mère des Herbes is not, however, a connection to be likened to the traditional images of the maternal: she is the image of the mother that has long been forgotten by modern society because she maintains the frightening elements of her powerful maternity, “oubliée depuis longtemps parce qu’elle avait des yeux acudes et noirs et luisants comme des yeux d’insectes, des nageoires de poissons aiguës et polies par l’usure et le frottement de l’eau des hauts fonds et un beau ventre tacheté” (77).

The previous description, likening la Mère des Herbes to a fish, reminds the reader of the ancient connection between the maternal and the figure of the serpent. As in the biblical story of Adam and Eve, the serpent often represents the anti-patriarchal stance found in la Mère des Herbes. Marchessault rewrites the story of creation to focus in a more positive way on this figure, the creation of the constellation of the Serpent a response to God’s commandment “Que la lumière soit!” (83); the Serpent in this way is shown to be an integral part of Creation, existing like la Mère des Herbes “partout, à tous les niveaux de l’être, dans nos têtes d’enfant de la Terre, dans nos cœurs où il se déchaîne ainsi qu’un cri d’amour” (84). The analogy between the Serpent and the mother is made manifest in the description of the Serpent’s rebellion against the law of the Father, refusing to abdicate intelligence and power in order to be pleasing to God. In this way the Serpent is eternally linked to the feminine, representing powerful women who refuse to fit into the Church’s idea of appropriate feminine behavior. As the first rebel in the Biblical text, the Serpent sets an example for women who refuse to be stripped of their intelligence: “Il a osé! Et seul encore, tout seul contre le courroux du Père” (84). In the first hours of the creation myth, the Serpent makes a role for itself as allied with the Mother and refusing the domination of the Father. The narrator presents the role of the Serpent, the erstwhile villain of the creation story, as the first liberator of women:

[C]e qui m’enchante, ce qui me met l’eau à la bouche, fait battre des ailes à mon cerveau, ce qui me met tout un printemps intérieur dans le corps, c’est cette phrase qui dit que le Serpent se dressa contre Dieu. Que c’est beau! Se dresser contre! Se dresser contre le premier oppresseur. J’aurais voulu qu’il se soit dressé avec plus de violence encore, en secouant tout l’arbre, en faisant tomber des fruits. (85)

These frightening descriptions—recalling both the Serpent and the powerful figure of the Witch—distinguish la Mère des herbes from the downtrodden and resentful mothers of pre-Quiet Revolution Québec. The narrator of *La Mère des Herbes* takes a harsh stance against these passively aggressive mothers, condemning their silence and suggesting that, rather than pretending to follow the example of the Virgin Mary, they leave their spiritual cross and thus reject their spiritually dead existence:

Maman, les mamans pourquoi n’avez-vous pas parlé plus fort? Pourquoi, je vous le demande! Je vous le demanderai toujours. Maudite maman à marde! Maudite maman à marde, il aurait fallu crier. Maudite maman complice! Maudite maman engluée, noyée, emmurée, aplatie, pourquoi! Pourquoi je te le demande? T’avais peur... T’as toujours eu peur des mots, peur du grand pénis des mots. (123)

Her criticism of mothers who have accepted their unfortunate lot transcends the physical realm, reaching to the spiritual realm. She encourages them to reject the ideals of the Church leaders that “nous ont fermé la gueule au baptême” (126) and to opt instead for the spiritual vitality of Nature and the Earth:

[O]n se promènerait au-dessus de la Terre avec l’âme de la Terre, avec son corps de gloire, son corps d’aurore qui ni connaît ‘ni la nuit, ni les ténèbres, ni la

maladie aux mille morts'. On se promènerait de tous bords, tous côtés, allant partout, visitant tout le monde, parlant de nos projets, du grand changement, parlant de nous autres avec des mots de nouveaux-nés issus d'une matrice tendre, neuve. (124)

The last image reminds the reader that the narrator is indeed talking of a spiritual birth, one that does not spring from a weary womb in great need of rest like so many of the physical births of pre-Quiet Revolution Québec. Instead, the womb putting forth these new souls of the Earth is full of vitality and free from oppression. This utopian image of the spiritual rebirth of Québécois mothers hints also at needed transformations in the physical act of mothering: Marchessault asks mothers to give more attention to each act of maternity, and to refuse any institution that does not let them fully experience their powers of procreation.

In a subversive act of refusal of the maternal imperative, Marchessault's *La Mère des Herbes* shows Québécois women passing on secrets for the termination of an undesired pregnancy. The unwanted fetus is seen by the women of this text as an evil spirit that must be exorcised, a physical manifestation of women's lack of choice in their own lives (234). Despite the necessity for a secretive act in order to escape unwanted pregnancy, the transmission of information between generations of women is at the very heart of the narrator's ideal maternal narrative, showing an undercurrent of strength in the familial relationships between women:

On se transmettrait ça de grand-mère en petite fille. Transmission orale, il va sans dire. Souvent sur le lit de mort, à l'instant du premier soupir de délivrance, les grands-mères réclamaient l'aînée de la famille, de sexe féminin. Chuchotement, hoquet de surprise, râlement, les dernières volontés de la mourante, c'est sacré! (235)

The spiritual richness of the adored grandmother, “dont l’esprit nomade et poétique infuse dans l’écriture de l’auteur des resonances magiques cognatiques,” (9) is on par with the supernatural characters of “La Grande Oursonne” or “La Mère des Herbes” in forming the spiritual make-up of the narrator. Though earth-bound and mortal, Grand-mère appears as a descendant of “La Grande Mère,” and her teachings provide spiritual nourishment for the narrator. Grand-mère introduces the narrator from a young age to a unique brand of spirituality, initiating her into the realm of angels and acquaints her with her guardian angel, which she is quick to distinguish from the angels that abound in the Catholic tradition: “Cet ange ne jouait pas de la viole d’amour du côté de la Voie lactée comme voulaient le faire croire les super-zombies catholiques de la paroisse. Ni le temps de souffler dans les trompettes du jugement dernier” (30). Despite the hold that angels have over her life, Grand-mère rejects the black-and-white view of human existence held by the Church, imparting to her granddaughter a cynical suspicion of the Catholic veneration of the Absolute:

Plus souvent qu’autrement, l’Absolu elle le remettait à sa place et s’assoit dessus. N’était pas le genre de personne à vivre à plein temps avec l’Absolu, comme le font souvent les hommes. Les concepts abstraits, trop éreintants pour elle! L’Absolu c’est raide comme une barre de feu, dur comme un boulet de canon... Saint-Absolu, justifiez-nous! C’est le saint patron le plus populaire en ville. Ses sanctuaires couvrent la Terre. Une vraie épidémie! (31)

Grand-mère’s spirituality comes not from a set of beliefs in an Absolute God, but from her experiences as a woman, “faite pour vivre dans un espace à quatre dimensions, la quatrième étant justement le besoin viscéral qu’elle avait de me parler de ses désirs, ses espérances, son irrationnel” (33). This refusal of the realm of the Absolute is found in numerous modes of

“feminist” spiritualities that express reluctance to delineate the spiritual realm in any concrete way, for therein lies the downfall of patriarchal religion. This desire that Grand-mère possesses separates her from the Catholic tradition, wherein even the word “desire” is surrounded by negative connotations. She is thus set apart from other women of the text who refuse to give voice to their desires, such as “les filles Cavalier” of a neighboring family who, “tous des membres des tribus catholiques,” fear being discovered as different from others. Even in the repressed lives of these young women, however, “le désir a sans doute pondu son œuf” (45). Refusing to repress her own desire, as do these good Catholic girls, Grand-mère transmits her earthly rituals to the narrator by way of captivating stories, coming from her own experience yet extending to embrace the entire realm of humanity:

Ses paroles, je les buvais, je les mangeais. Peu importe de quoi, de qui, elle parlait, son discours se remplissait d’odeurs, de phénomènes physiologiques qui déclenchaient un plaisir immédiat dans tout le corps. Ses récits avaient presque toujours pour sujet des êtres de sang et d’os, peu importe si ce sang et ces os étaient d’origine végétale, minérale ou animale. Ce qu’elle connaissait, savait de tous et de chacune, était une connaissance qui donne la vie, qui injecte la vitalité. L’écouter, pour moi, c’était écouter la voix de tout ce qui vit. (34)

Grand-mère’s powerful discourse demonstrates the potential force of a woman’s word, compared implicitly with the stale “word” of religious texts. The fact that her words come from all parts of her being suggests a rich connectedness between the physical and metaphysical dimensions that the narrator does not find in Catholic doctrine:

Oh! la belle parole cellulaire! Multidimensionnelle! Parole qui fait appel à toutes les émotions connues ou oubliées. Elle vient de partout: autant du haut que du bas,



du mouillé, du foudroyant, du gonflé, du juteux, du nuageux...Aucune oppression religieuse, politique, aucune persécution ne viendra à bout de cette parole. (35)

Her love of storytelling is shared with the other women in the text, who “inventaient, brassaient le bouillon, le filtraient pour la quatrième fois, ajoutant des épices, des aromates” to their stories. The culinary metaphor is appropriate in that the women’s stories are valuable in terms of the sensual pleasures that they bring forth; the role of truth takes a backseat to myth for these women who often said things that they themselves did not understand, knowing that nonetheless “un jour ces choses leur apparaîtraient claires et chargées de sens.” The value of their language is not in the ability to transmit information, but rather to convey sensual images: “Ce langage était vivant, significatif et ça coulait, ça coulait dans un flot sinueux ou en droite ligne en traversant des paysages, des certitudes” (39). The sensuous language used by the narrator’s mother, grandmother, and aunt fill her with a deep hunger for the story, and her determination to follow in the footsteps of these women pervades the entire text. The narrator’s constant exposure to sensual, passionate stories throughout her youth is reflected in the tone of the text, broken up as it is by exclamation marks and other signs of an oral story-telling heritage.

The women’s stories do not vilify the body in the way of the Catholic tradition, leaving the narrator open to a positive relationship with the female body. Refusing the drastic separation between the metaphysical and the physical realm (and the negation of the former), the women of these texts allow for a spiritual existence that includes the previously rejected domains of sexuality and maternity. The maternal body is the primary source of emotional and spiritual sustenance: it is here that the identity of the child takes root, and is in this way the ultimate symbol of physical and spiritual comfort. This reinvention of the mother ironically demands a reevaluation of the many assumptions regarding maternity in a woman’s life, namely that of the

supremacy of this role in relation to all other possible roles that a woman may take on. As we have seen, such questioning is evident in the ambivalence of mother characters in many works of Marie-Claire Blais and Anne Hébert, and, most notably, in *L'Euguélienne*. Yet this ambivalence does not lead to a devaluation of motherhood; rather as the 21<sup>st</sup> century came into sight many women writers of Québec found new ways to validate motherhood, but in a new and creative way, on their own terms, as opposed to blind acceptance of the role given them by the patriarchal order. By questioning even that relationship that we still hold sacred in our modern and so-called liberated society, that of the mother and her child, women writers of Québec reveal a side of maternity that is multi-faceted and spiritually rich.

The Mother figure in these texts plays an indispensable role in the construction of spiritual identity, for the origin of existence is also the origin of religious belief. The Church has long served to limit women within the domain of maternity with the promise that this is, in fact, their one possibility for salvation. Escape from the cycle of the maternal imperative has been, therefore, an essential part of the breaking away of Québécois society from the reactionary views that reigned over political and social life until the 1960's. In these texts there is no confusing loss of identity or oppressive maternal imperative, but rather a new ideal for the maternal role: "the ideal or powerful Mother is collapsed into the heroine's self; she is the Mother one is becoming or can potentially become, a symbol of women's strength and empowerment" (Elder xix). Whereas many literary works following the Quiet Revolution simply obliterate motherhood, seeking to undo the myth that motherhood is the central purpose of a woman's existence and an indispensable key to her spiritual fulfillment, certain Québécois texts instead usurp this myth to use it for their own agenda: these writers present the maternal role—whether literal or spiritual in nature—as a source of spiritual fulfillment and strength. This theme of maternity provides a

fertile arena for the discussion of women's developing spiritual identity in modern Québec, for a relationship with the "mother" is symbolic of a coming-to-terms with origin and identity, so much so that the latter may not be achieved without the former. These post-Quiet Revolution texts written by women bring the figure of the mother to the forefront, providing powerful identification not only with the biological mother but also with the mythical symbolic mother. Using this oft-neglected and downtrodden figure as a vehicle for spiritual empowerment allows Québec to cleanse itself of the negative associations with motherhood that have pervaded its mentality since the province's inception.

## Chapter 5 The Occult

It is no accident that one of Québec's well-known texts from the post-Quiet Revolution era, a collection of monologues for women, is entitled *La Nef des sorcières*. In fact, all of the characters in this text—lesbians, prostitutes, post-menopausal old women—find themselves, like the figure of the Sorceress, pushed to the margins of a society that seeks to eradicate them. The subjects within the text touch upon the very issues that are at the crux of women's fight against oppression: gender inequality, prostitution, dealing with taboos and societal stereotypes regarding lesbianism, menopause and menstruation; they are also all themes that—like other “women's issues”—are usually reserved for hushed tones behind closed doors. Instead of remaining hidden from public view, these issues are brought to light to show that, as the final monologue proclaims, “la vie privée est politique” (129), that the oppression of women is no longer accepted silently. The link between the fight for liberation, equality, and voice that these monologues dramatize is buoyed by the metaphor of the Witch, who in her many forms validates those aspects of women's existence that are feared and repressed in the Catholic (patriarchal) system. It is therefore not surprising that protectors of the patriarchy have targeted this figure of female strength: the witch-hunts that took place in Europe and the Americas in the 17<sup>th</sup> century remain strong in our collective memory and continue to be a fertile arena for literary texts, appearing as a metaphor for women's oppression in such texts as Maryse Condé's *Moi Tituba, sorcière...* and *The Crucible*. The patriarchal fear of the Witch appears in these texts as a metaphor for the patriarchal fear of women, as shown in the following excerpt from a 15<sup>th</sup> century “handbook of witch-hunting”:

[S]ince through the first defect in their intelligence, they are always more prone to abjure the faith, so through their second defect of inordinate passions, they search for, brood over and inflict various vengeance, either by Witchcraft or by other means. Wherefore it is no wonder that so great a number of witches exist in this sex. (Ruether 127)

This thought led, of course, to the torture and murder of countless women in the name of God. Few categories of women were immune from this horrific campaign, as even peace-loving Quaker women were targeted, “stripped and pricked for ‘witch’s teats’” (Ruether 143). The true target of this persecution is not really a mythical creature who rides around on a broomstick, but the female psyche, especially if we agree with Mary Daly’s assertion that “any woman who has spiritually liberated herself from the patriarchal world view is, essentially, a Witch” (29).

Serving as a reminder that women will not relinquish their power so easily as much of patriarchal power would like, the Witch figure creates a space where the feminine imagination is valued: “La sorcellerie et sa répression, si elles ne sont pas réductibles à une manifestation ou à une persécution du féminin, développent un imaginaire de la femme” (Baider 5). It is precisely this “forte convergence du réel et de l’imaginaire” that makes of the Sorceress “une sorte d’étendard; figure de résistance et de subversion, elle annonce la volonté de briser des tabous, de faire advenir un ordre nouveau” (*La Nef* 26-7).

Québec’s movement away from the strict values of Catholicism is manifested in many texts by an increased interest in Witches, Warlocks, and strange supernatural beings. The appearance of this subversive theme reflects two growing currents in the literature of Québec: it serves to question the power and validity of the Catholic Church by comparing it to the vilified and subversive tradition of Witchcraft, as well as speaking to the desire for alternative spiritual

experiences that bypass the cultural and social limitations of the Catholic faith. Representing “une rupture, une déchirure dans la trame de la réalité quotidienne” (Steinmetz 12), the realm of the supernatural is one in which the split of Québécois women with their Catholic heritage is particularly dramatic. The Witch becomes, in numerous texts of post-Quiet Revolution Québec, a symbol for the resurrection of gynophilic spirituality: a strong metaphor for women living independently of Catholic society. The appearance of the Witch, in her many forms, creates an atmosphere of spiritual and cultural rebirth:

The Witch...is an extraordinary symbol—independent, anti-establishment, strong, and proud. She is political, yet spiritual and magical. The Witch is woman as martyr; she is persecuted by the ignorant; she is the woman who lives outside society and outside society’s definition of woman. (Margot Adler qtd. in Van Dyke 81)

Although it would be foolish to point to any single aspect of Québécois society as a catalyst for the explosion of these supernatural themes, it is clear that certain aspects of its history created a fertile ground for the growth of such themes. Paul Côté suggests the particular nature of Québécois mysticism as a possible point of departure for this phenomenon:

Si la croyance en Dieu et aux miracles est une condition requise pour la survie de l’occultisme, la Nouvelle-France remplit les exigences. Pays dominé par le catholicisme depuis ses origines, où les rites de l’Eglise, de même que les saisons, ordonnaient les activités des gens, le Québec se révélait un terrain propice à l’émergence de sorciers et d’alchimistes, de fantômes et de démons comme en témoigne son riche folklore. (100)

Whatever the cultural mechanism at work, the references to the supernatural that we find in Québécois literature are inevitably set against the opposing spiritual background of Catholicism. Often ominous and frightening, these images create a spiritual domain in which women are powerful members of society, possessing freedom and influence. Symbolically opposed to the revered image of the Virgin Mary, the Sorceress symbolizes women's quest for spiritual identity: while Catholicism emphasizes the importance of the exclusively male trinity—putting women on a pedestal to be adulated while excluded from any significant role in the Church—adherents to the tradition of Witchcraft are in quite the opposite position, for they “recognize both God and Goddess but give emphasis to the latter. Women are high priestesses and generally have the ultimate authority” (Ingman 28). Mainstream patriarchal society presented the Sorceress not as a wise woman but as an ugly, asexual, demonic crone in cautionary tales that counseled women to remain in the straight and narrow path of Christian subservience. The texts that I will be analyzing—two by Anne Hébert and one by Louky Bersianik—recycle the subversive image of the Sorceress for their own purposes, making her a metaphor for women's spiritual journey in post-Quiet Revolution Québec. Instead of reinforcing the negative aspects of non-Christian supernatural forces, these writers illuminate the spiritual richness found therein. The characters used by these writers to illustrate the rich possibilities of the Occult traditions often—though not always—find themselves diametrically opposed to the Catholic tradition. This opposition reinforces the long-standing tension between patriarchal Christianity and the subversive, more gynocentric traditions of the Occult.

Although it is generally thought that the persecution of Witches was an early invention of Christianity, it was not until relatively recent history that the Church began to consider this matrifocal tradition as a dangerous enemy, and thus to persecute and kill its adherents:

Not until the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries did first the Catholic and then the emerging Protestant churches begin extensive persecutions of Witches. Thousands, more likely millions, of women and men were imprisoned, tortured, hanged, or burned...They helped drive women out of the professions of healing and midwifery. And they cemented the hatred of women and sexuality onto the foundation of modern Western culture. (Buckley 313)

This growing suspicion of the professions of midwifery and healing reflects the Christian tradition's increasing mistrust of women whose self-created identities were not in keeping with their expected roles within the Church. This perceived threat is indicative of the patriarchal focus of the Church; the latter's tendency toward binary vision—good v. bad, heaven v. hell, God v. Satan—is manifest in its rejection of both the real and the metaphorical figure of the Sorceress as a representation of all women who transgress patriarchal law, and thus her existence even as a symbol in the imagination of women poses a real threat to that law: “le crime de la sorcière, c'était de vouloir passer de l'état d'objet à fonction mimétique assignée par la loi, à celui de sujet à fonction diégétique, sujet du corps, du faire et du dire, c'est-à-dire de rejeter le modèle de la Vierge, reine du Moyen-Age” (Hajdukowski-Ahmed 263). This refusal of the objectification that patriarchal society would place on women is perhaps the most important of the Sorceress' metaphorical implications. She is frightening because she transgresses the understood law of modern society that tells us that women are passive rather than active. It is for this reason that she is the perfect foil to the pure but powerless virginal ideal, acting instead as a spiritual warrior and guide:

[L]a sorcière représente alors une figure de chaos particulièrement dangereuse pour l'Église puisqu'elle reprend le rôle de la matrice féminine du Christianisme



(c'est un sacrilège), et qui plus est *autrement* (autre blasphème). Cette notion nous permet alors de situer la sorcière comme l'icône de la résistance radicale des femmes au Moyen Âge, comme une authentique rupture d'avec les conditions de son oppression. Véritable figure de proue, elle mène les femmes vers l'émancipation, vers une naissance spirituelle, en quelque sorte, d'une autre femme telle la Marianne échevelée de Delacroix menant le peuple à la Révolution et à la Victoire. (Baider 17)

While most fairy tales would depict the Witch as an asexual being, this is not at all the case: an important aspect of the remedy to the inaccessible and unrealistic image of the Virgin Mary is the sexualization of the Witch figure: “Since at least the time of the Gnostic heresies...illicit sexuality was often believed to go hand in hand with secret ritual and the black arts” (Urban 696). It is therefore not surprising to find that the Witches who appear in recent Québécois texts are highly sexualized, encouraging the exploration both of all pleasurable aspects of existence and of all paths toward true self-knowledge, including sexual ecstasy. In reintegrating the dark image of the Witch—and the mysterious and powerful aspects of femininity that accompany her—writers revived the importance of women's self-awareness, independence, and spiritual wisdom.

Anne Hébert weaves the figure of the Sorceress into many of her texts as a manifestation of the powerful feminine spirit, and as a reaction against the stultifying effect of the Church on women's psyches. Hébert's *Kamouraska* opposes the Witch figure to the resigned and obedient mother / wife figure who sacrifices her own pleasure for her husband and family. *Les Enfants du Sabbat* pits the Witch more directly against the Church by placing her in a convent, which she slowly infuses with her sinister powers. Her texts paint a picture of the Sorceress as tinged with

darkness and violence, but as nonetheless contributing to a spiritual renaissance for women. Only well after the Quiet Revolution do images of wholly benevolent Sorceress figures begin to appear in her texts, suggesting that her vision of the supernatural has changed into a much more socially constructive one, as we see in *La Cage*, a dramatic rewriting of the life and tragic death of Ludivine Corriveau. Beginning with terrifying images of the Witch figure, Hébert's fiction gradually progresses towards a more hopeful and positive image of women's spirituality.

*Kamouraska* represents a text “de révolte et de subversion où la sorcellerie tiendrait lieu d’arme dans cette lutte acharnée de l’être humain pour affirmer son existence et son identité,” most specifically in women's struggle to affirm their identity (Purdy 105). Marginal in terms of social class and religious practice, the most obvious Sorceress in *Kamouraska*, Aurélie, is nonetheless integrated into the society of the other characters. Her paranormal abilities place this servant in a central role in the novel, even giving her influential power over her *maîtresse* as she encourages Elisabeth to invent an alter ego for herself that provides a means of escape from her abused and secluded life as her husband Antoine's punching bag. In fact, Aurélie turns out to be only a secondary Sorceress figure, her powers diminishing in comparison to Elisabeth, who is revealed as the true Sorceress of the text: the latter explores the darker side of her psyche in her dreams and imagination while maintaining the façade of a proper 19<sup>th</sup> century Québécois wife and mother.

In contrast with more powerful images of the Sorceress, the character of Aurélie Caron wields little power over those around her. Not yet possessing control of her supernatural powers, she is apt to botch a spell and in fact does so, much to the dismay of George and Elisabeth. Largely ignorant of the powers that she possesses, Aurélie exhibits the ethereal qualities of the Sorceress, appearing to Elisabeth as a phantom: “On ne l’entend jamais venir. Tout à coup elle

est là. Comme si elle traversait les murs. Légère et transparente” (133). Among her physical traits of the Sorceress, her cat-like yellow eyes (140, 179) recall the powerful yellow eyes of Julie de la Trinité, eyes that allowed her to dominate the patriarchal powers of the convent. Despite her magical abilities, Aurélie’s childlike desire for pretty dresses and jewelry makes her an easy prey for George and Elisabeth’s murderous plot. Dressing Aurélie in Elisabeth’s luxurious clothes, they lure her with the very things that her position in life will never allow her to possess: “Si tu réussis à ôter la vie à M. Tassy, tu n’auras plus à travailler le restant de tes jours. Tu vivras comme une dame, en velours rouge” (180). Aurélie’s fate is in fact quite the opposite as she is brought into George and Elisabeth’s sinister web of crime.

While Aurélie may be the self-proclaimed Sorceress of the text, her ingrained knowledge of magic offsetting Elisabeth’s image as the respected wife of Antoine de Tassy, it is Elisabeth who proves herself the more manipulative and conniving of the two when she makes her servant the scapegoat for her own murderous plot against her husband (187). Despite Elisabeth’s fundamental desire to affirm her existence and her true spiritual identity, she initially lacks the strength to integrate the darker, earthier elements of her inner life into her image as Jérôme Rolland’s estimable wife. Her spiritual journey unfulfilled, she continues to present to the outside world only a thin reflection of her real self. The innocence that she claims in regards to the murder of her husband is an important part of this veneer: Elisabeth avoids taking responsibility by diverting attention to either Aurélie “la Sorcière” or George, “le diable”:

Si Elisabeth veut agir, elle doit le faire par l’intermédiaire d’un agent: ou bien Aurélie Caron qui est censée être sorcière et qui possède donc les pouvoirs nécessaires pour exercer une action, ou bien George Nelson qui fait figure du diable et donc d’une force opérante. (Côté 106)

Ironically, Elisabeth will be left to fend for herself when George later flees the country in the face of suspicions of murder, and when she is implicated by Aurélie who does not try to dissimulate her guilt but also accuses her mistress: “Je n’ai jamais été innocente. Ni Madame non plus” (61). Although she proves herself ineffective in terms of her craft, Aurélie has clearly accepted that there are both dark and light forces that reign over her spiritual life: this is opposition to her mistress, who does not integrate the dark forces that work on her psyche until the end of the novel.

Appearing to possess a dual personality, Elisabeth seeks freedom from Québécois society’s puritanical ideals yet also fears judgment and conforms, at least in appearance, to her society’s idea of what is—and most importantly what is not—acceptable for a woman in her position. This discrepancy between Elisabeth’s two opposing identities is illuminated in the use of the first person “je” and the third person “Mme Rolland,” as shown in the following passage:

Oui, oui, je suis folle. C’est cela la folie, se laisser emporter par un rêve; le laisser croître en toute liberté, exubérant, envahissant. Inventer une horreur à propos d’une charrette égarée dans la ville...Mme Rolland va à la fenêtre, d’un geste large elle ouvre la jalousie, la rabat sur le mur. Autant en avoir le cœur net. On verra bien si cette charrette de malheur existe. (23)

This internal conflict displays itself in recurring nightmares in which Elisabeth appears as a Sorceress with superhuman powers, a testament to her need to find a powerful expression of her spirituality that places her in an active position of control. The figure of the Witch provides a perfect outlet for this need: always frightening and often hideously ugly, she is never lacking in power. Through this Witch-like alter ego that inhabits her subconscious, Elisabeth finds the spiritual power that she lacks in her waking hours. Seen by all as the devoted wife, Elisabeth is

admired and pitied for her self-sacrificing tears: “Voyez donc comme Madame aime Monsieur! Voyez comme elle pleure” (250). In truth her tears are a mix of regret for the lost Docteur Nelson and fear of her uncertain future now that her second husband, a safe bulwark against the past and the source of her renewed social status, is near death. Despite the anxiety brought on by Jérôme’s period of infirmity, the latter is in fact a particularly fruitful time for Elisabeth’s active imagination, for it allows her to hide behind the façade of the loving wife while she indulges herself in memories of the haunting events of her youth and speculation as to the whereabouts of her true love: “Est-il possible qu’il vive encore? Et s’il était marié? Non, non je ne supporterais pas! Je le préfère plutôt mort, là étendu à mes pieds que...Qu’aucune femme ne puisse jamais...” (249). Encircling her fantasies of her beloved George are suggestions of her other-worldliness, for Elisabeth sees herself as belonging to another, darker realm of existence:

Moi-même étrangère et possédée, feignant d’appartenir au monde des vivants. Perfide Elisabeth...Il aurait fallu me décider plus tôt. Partir avec George. Être déportée avec lui. Au cœur même de la malédiction de la terre. Plus qu’un pays étranger. La terre entière étrangère. L’exil parfait. La solitude des fous. Voyez comme on nous montre du doigt. C’est moi qui vous ai poussé de l’autre côté du monde. (248)

The face of the Sorceress, reflected in Aurélie and Elisabeth, is set against the unambiguously wicked face of the devil that makes an appearance in the male characters. Antoine is the primary masculine “démon” of the text, the abusive husband whose evil streak runs so deep as to allow him to punch his pregnant wife in the gut. He is “un monstre...Il me torture et veut me tuer. A plusieurs reprises, déjà. La dernière fois, il a voulu me couper le cou avec son rasoir” (236). Hébert refuses to give her readers the easy satisfaction of excusing

Antoine's murder, however, and thus sanctifying George and Elisabeth. Despite his role as a life-saving humanitarian doctor, George also possesses the darker traits of the devil. These sinister traits appear to increase following Antoine's murder, transforming George from Elisabeth's savior into "un diable américain qui maudit les mamelles des femmes" (114), "le plus grand diable" (175), "le roi des démons" (194). These demonic images of masculine characters extend to include Elisabeth's child from her relationship with George, whom she calls "ce petit demon" (10).

Elisabeth's deepening awareness of what lies in the hidden corners of her psyche brings up images of untamed instinct, such as that of a wild dog stirring in its sleep: "Une chienne en moi se couche. Gémit doucement. Hurle à la mort" (215). This kind of animal imagery is potent as it reflects the "archaic wisdom" of the instinctual animal, antipathetic to dogmatic and moralistic religion: "[A]nimals live absolutely 'true' to their natures, and indeed they cannot do otherwise. This animal grounding in unreflective consciousness is considered sacred in numerous cultures" (Salman 79).

It must be noted, however, that the darkness now stirring in Elisabeth has been present from the beginning of the text; the change is one only of awareness. A glance in the mirror earlier in the text reveals the already-present conflict in Elisabeth's psyche:

Ma jeunesse sans un pli...Un port de reine. Une âme de vipère. Un cœur fou d'amour. Une idée fixe entre les deux yeux. Une fleur dans les cheveux. L'œil gauche deviant fou. Les deux paupières s'abaissent. Le frôlement des cils sur la joue. (134)

Elisabeth's sinister alter ego appears often in her daydreams, providing a welcome—if harsh—respite from the docile, conformist image that she maintains for the outside world. At the

end of the novel, her dreams of sorcery transform her into a dark creature whose cry rouses both wild animals and wild and cruel humans, as she succumbs to the dark side of her spirituality. Though the bog woman is literally occulted (hidden) in Elisabeth's subconscious throughout the greater part of the novel, the latter is nonetheless painfully aware of this dark entity that she fears may overtake her:

Elisabeth's 'bog woman' rises up from the depths to disrupt the very foundations of human society...resurrected, she threatens to destroy Elisabeth's carefully cultivated respectability and undermine the social position she has laboured to carve out for herself as Jérôme Rolland's wife. (Purdy 451)

Although she is haunted by the murder of her first husband and trapped in a second passionless marriage, the real source of Elisabeth's haunting is her own rebellious spirit that refuses to die. While Elisabeth has buried her passions and feigned fulfillment in the life of an obedient wife and mother, the Witch that fills her psyche has been alienated by society, unpardoned for her sins and left to die alone and miserable:

On l'a lâchée dans la petite ville. Puis on s'est barricadé, chacun chez soi. Tant la peur qu'on a de cette femme est grande et profonde...Lorsque la femme se présente en ville, courant et implorant, le tocsin se met à sonner. Elle ne trouve que des portes fermées et le désert de terre battue dont sont faites les rues. Il ne lui reste sans doute plus qu'à mourir de faim et de solitude. Malfaisante Elisabeth!  
Femme maudite! (250)

The previous passage shows that—at least in Elisabeth's imagination—she and the creepy “bog woman” have already become one, a “permanent pariah” feared by all, “a person of such passionate attachment to life, freedom, happiness, and, above all, love that society, feeling itself

threatened, closes its doors and condemns her as evil” (Sachs 117). Hébert at no point provides a clear description of this unchained manifestation of Elisabeth’s dark psyche, only writing that she is “noire, vivante, datant d’une époque reculée et sauvage” (250). The power of the dark world into which Elisabeth descends is frightening but also empowering, daring her to free herself from the chains of marriage and motherhood that keep her spiritually imprisoned. The haunting images of this mysterious and inhuman bog woman remind the reader that Elisabeth’s real identity lies deep under the surface, woven into the fabric of her character.

The ambivalent depictions of the Sorceress in *Kamouraska* exemplify what Jean Ethier-Blais refers to as Hébert’s “waiting literature... a literature which adheres to the reality of a people hesitant to define themselves as a nation” (qtd in Rosenstreich 63). More specifically, this text expresses the difficulty women meet in delineating their role in Québécois society. This manifests itself for Elisabeth as a binary split into two markedly different personalities, a common literary expression of a cultural sickness (Mauguière *Traversée* 167). Elisabeth’s journey from “kept” woman to “bog” woman—far from representing a completely fulfilling spiritual awakening—show the slow and generally painful movement away from traditional spiritual practices toward a more personal kind of self-knowledge. We might read the terrifying bog woman who surfaces at the end of the text as Elisabeth’s surfacing unconscious, at last contributing a necessary and soulful darkness to Elisabeth’s human experience. A creature ahead of her time in many ways, Elisabeth nonetheless does not escape her spiritual maelstrom by the end of the text. She instead suffers and struggles, paving the way for an authentic spiritual life for women that integrates both the light and the dark sides of existence.

*Les Enfants du Sabbat*, a dark text in which modern concerns regarding Catholicism are placed in opposition to the world of the Occult, finds Sœur Julie de la Trinité caught between



two worlds: a stultifying convent and the sinister “cabane” of her youth. The sterile environment of the convent is an appropriate foil for the darkly incestuous past of Julie, and the condescending patriarchal institution of the convent is no match for the demons that continue to haunt her. The lack of a middle ground between good and evil forces the young Julie to choose between her new role as a nun in the Catholic Church and her deep desire for power through the mysterious underworld of the Occult; this spiritual journey forces her eventually to confront her true identity as a Sorceress. Julie flees her troubled childhood among sorcerers by entering the convent, a narrative choice that draws out the traditional good / evil opposition implicit in the relationship between the Church and the Occult. Julie’s experience as a nun serves to bring her closer to her sinister childhood; only after living as a nun is she able to reject the unattainable image of purity proposed by the convent. In this way Julie reflects the conflict of Québécois women of the post-Quiet Revolution era, torn between an oppressive past and an uncertain future. Though clear in her rejection of the reactionary ideals of the Church, especially as pertains to women, Hébert is nonetheless troubled by the loss of a tradition that encompasses the history of her *pays*.

The fact that we first encounter Julie as a young woman with amnesia is not without importance: Julie has literally forgotten herself, a symbolic reference to the women of Québec who, like her, have forgotten their own individuality and accepted the imposed model of womanhood. Julie’s self-discovery is thus a painful and laborious one. The “petite fille” of the Witches’ lair appears to Julie as a stranger, the nun figure a schizophrenic self-concept created from the trauma of her childhood. Julie’s powers of sorcery appear to increase in direct correlation to her growing awareness of her origins and her true identity. First reliving her own

memories as surreal visions of another world, Julie then begins to actually transport herself to “la cabane,” returning to the convent with scratches from the trees from the surrounding forests.

Julie’s paranormal departure from the convent reflects the choice of many Québécois women of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century to choose a spiritual existence free of the arbitrary moral codes of the Church. In throwing off her habit in favor of a Witch’s costume, Julie de la Trinité shows that this rejection is indeed a viable choice, and that it is possible to reject an arbitrary and artificially imposed spirituality. As in many texts where the Sorceress appears as a marginal character, her presence in Hébert’s text underscores the need to imagine a gynocentric spiritual life. Like the sensual ceremony of the Witches’ Sabbath, the universe of these texts represents “a distinct celebration of reversals, where all that is held sacred to the dominant culture is overturned” (Joy 186). That dominant culture is described by the narrative voice in *Les Enfants du Sabbat*, evoking the misery of much of early 20<sup>th</sup> century rural Québec: “Nous sommes liés par les promesses et les interdictions. Nous sommes soumis à la dureté du climat et à la pauvreté de la terre. Nous sommes tenus par la crainte du péché et la peur de l’enfer.” It is a misery, however, that is accepted: “Dix, quinze enfants à faire baptiser, dans une vie de femme, qu’y a-t-il de plus ordinaire?” (119). Women found themselves at the mercy of the ideology of “la revanche du berceau,” so it is no great surprise to discover the existence of clandestine “faiseuses d’anges,” like Philomène, who aborts a village woman’s seventeenth pregnancy and inadvertently causes the woman’s death.

Hébert’s depiction of the world of Witchcraft as existing in close parallel with the repressive world of the convent suggests that the latter is no more pure than the former; rather, it is a mask that covers up the darker sides of human nature. Hébert asks the reader to examine her own belief about what is pure and what is not. In drawing out the many parallels between the

rituals of the two spiritual traditions, Hébert points out the relativity of the concepts of good and evil. Those things that are considered “evil,” she suggests, are not so different from that which is sanctified:

Hébert seems to be asking the following questions: Is the black mass any blacker than the white mass? Is the drinking of Philomène’s ‘bagosse’ any different than drinking communal blood? ... When Hébert describes parts of the ceremony at the Montagne de B... which are simple inversions of the Catholic mass...it is a juxtaposition that offers a striking illustration of moral relativity and an attack on personal and institutional perversion, whoever the person and whatever the institution. (Knight 91)

The comparison of communal blood with Philomène’s menstrual blood evokes a fundamental comparison between the Occult tradition and Christianity. The blood of Jesus, however, is the foundation of the Christian faith, seen in the Catholic ritual of communion: the communion wafer transforms into the body of Christ, the wine into the blood of Christ, thus nourishing the confirmed Christian’s spiritual being. At the convent, appropriately named “Précieux-Sang,” Sœur Gemma cuts the bread for the Eucharist, experiencing the painful symbolism of her belief while she does so:

Lorsque Sœur Gemma songeait que Notre-Seigneur allait habiter là, corps et âme, dans ces hosties qu’elle découpait, des larmes d’amour lui venaient aux yeux. Elle croyait entendre battre, sous ses doigts, le sang du Christ, répandu sur la croix pour nos péchés. (47)

Julie’s participation in the Christian ritual of the Eucharist at the convent recalls her gruesome initiation into adulthood during which she was bled of the innocence of childhood: “il

faut que je sois vidée de tout mon sang, saignée à blanc, comme un poulet. Le sang d'enfance est pourrie et doit disparaître, être remplacé par de la semence magique" (67). The "semence magique" is that of her father who, possessed by the Devil, engenders both his child and grandchild in a ritual rape scene. Repulsed and terrified when her father rapes her, Julie's horror turns to enchantment during the ceremony of bleeding, during which she becomes vividly aware of the inherent power of her blood: "Je m'enchanté du bruit de mon sang, entre mes cuisses, qui s'éloigne de moi, avec une plainte douce et chantante" (67). The pleasure that Julie experiences during this ritual bleeding goes against the book of Leviticus' proscription of sex with menstruating women, who are to be considered as unclean for seven days. Instead of feeling unclean as the Bible would have her, Julie is "légère et douce, obéissante et ravie," honored to be "l'égale de ma mère et l'épouse de mon père" (67). This familial continuation is at the center of the tradition of Sorcery:

Ce n'est pas comme possédé du démon que le sorcier est créature fantastique mais comme participant monstrueusement d'un pouvoir acheté par contrat et perpétué de père en fils voire de mère en fille, dans une suite 'biblique.' (Fabre 412)

This occult ritual that Julie endures includes the cooking of "pain azyme," the same bread used at the convent for the ceremony of the Eucharist. The reversal of Christian symbolism is fulfilled in this scene: Julie's body provides the bread—it is the heat produced by Julie's bare skin that cooks the bread—and the blood that will be used for the Witches' rite of communion.

Hébert is far from suggesting that the incestuous rape to which Julie is victim might be a compelling path to liberation. The symbolic rape instead serves to highlight the multiple oppressions of the Church, for this horrific scene—with its troubling implications—is more "liberating" than any of Julie's experiences in the convent. It also calls into question the

assumption that we can every truly know the difference between good and evil, perhaps even refusing to admit a clear line that separates the two. Hébert might be aware of the fact that instances of rape and incest—because of the possibility of procreation therein—have been considered by the Catholic Church to be lesser crimes than non-violent sexual “crimes” against God such as using birth control, homosexuality, or masturbation.

Julie’s violent initiations into the world of the Occult, though horrifying and initially against her will, make her a formidable force against those in the convent who would destroy her. Julie’s transformation from powerless victim to savior suggests that she is a replacement for the Christ figure in this ritual of sorcery, providing not only the nourishing physical substances of bread and blood but also spiritual nourishment. Accepting her role as savior of her clan, Julie enjoys the privilege of both priest and confessor to her “subjects”:

Je leur ferai à tous sortir le méchant du corps. Je les confesserai tous. Je les délierais de leurs péchés...Mon pouvoir se décide et se fonde, en ce moment même où le feu, pareil à une bête, toutes griffes dehors, s’agrippe à mes reins. Moi-même feu et aliment de feu, je fais l’hostie de notre étrange communion. (69)

The textual reference to confession, sin, and the rite of communion makes it difficult to distinguish the Christian ritual from the Occult ritual. Julie’s memory of the Witches’ communion unfolds simultaneously with the convent’s ritual of the Eucharist, and while her body is present at the convent she is spiritually reliving her experience at “la cabane.” The comparison between the two traditions is further underlined by the striking similarity between her brother Joseph’s descriptions of his newfound Catholic faith and the Occult rituals of their childhood, causing Julie to suspect that the two traditions share “le même départ léger de soi-même, la même envolée vers les délices étrangères” (152).

It must be noted that Julie's power is at first not a chosen one. Her desire to reject the past is sincere, but her sinister history is woven into the thread of her being. She is drawn despite herself to memories of "la montagne de B..." her past life becoming most powerful when she is faced with the injustices of the Church. It is in fact one of the priests at the convent who explains to Julie the inescapable nature of her true self. His negative vision of Julie is informed by his perception of her as inherently evil, because a woman: "L'abbé Migneault explique à Sœur Julie qu'elle ment tout le temps, sans le savoir. Sa nature la plus profonde est menteuse, faussée en quelque sorte" (24). Julie's prescribed punishment for her evil nature—standing still with her arms in the form of a cross while reciting prayers—only strengthens the pull of "la consolation magique" of her dark past:

Elle commence par ne plus sentir la tension douloureuse de ses deux bras en croix. L'épuisement de son corps crucifié se transforme en une douceur étrange... Sœur Julie de la Trinité est transportée en esprit dans la montagne, tandis que son corps reste, debout en croix, tel un calvaire de pierre. Dans la chapelle blanche et dorée des dames du Précieux-Sang. (26)

Julie's nun costume is just that, a superficial disguise that has no true power over her dark nature. Julie's powers of sorcery defy the patriarchal institution of the Church that keeps all women "soumise(s)...jamais prêtres, mais victimes sur l'autel, avec le Christ, encadrées, conseillées, dirigées par nos supérieurs généraux, évêques et cardinaux, jusqu'au chef suprême et mâle certifié, sous sa robe blanche" (55). Sœur Julie refuses to be the object of the male gaze, instead using to her advantage the power of her own terrifying gaze. She comes, in fact, from a long line of Witches whose gaze paralyzes the patriarchal society that tries to repress and murder them:

Je leur fais peur parce que j'ai les yeux jaunes, comme ma mère et comme ma grand-mère. Toute une lignée de femmes aux yeux vipérins, venues des vieux pays, débarquées, il y a trois cents ans, avec leurs pouvoirs et leurs sorts en guise de bagages, s'accouplant avec le diable de génération en génération. (92)

Julie's powerful female ancestry shines out of her monstrous yellow eyes: "La pupille de son œil est horizontalement fendue, comme celle des loups" (91). The docteur Painchaud, having sworn to "la rendre impuissante, lui fermer ses sales yeux jaunes" (72), is instead rendered powerless by this gaze when he falls asleep with the image of Julie's eye in the palm of his hand: "L'œil de chat de Sœur Julie, son œil de hibou arraché de son orbite, déposé dans la main de Jean Painchaud... Une pierre d'apparence anodine, en réalité faite pour mirer le cœur le plus secret" (72). The image of Julie's evil eye invokes her presence, foretelling her haunting appearance in Doctor Painchaud's bedroom. The reference to wild animals in describing Julie's frightening eyes suggests evokes her instinctual nature, one that cannot be controlled by the "civilized" world of the Church. The animals that Julie is compared to—wolves, cats, owls—all symbolize the wisdom of the instinctual animal nature. This "wild" temperament may be read as a metaphor for the wild nature of all women, which despite having been tamed and imprisoned throughout history is still at the core of women's spirit.

The secrets of the convent are no less dark and mysterious than those of "la montagne de B..." they are merely disguised and called by other names: "Aucune mort, si étrange fût-elle, ne s'appelait jamais suicide. Aucun amour entre religieuses, si déchirant fût-il, ne s'appelait jamais amour. Aucune caresse brûlante, fugitive et tendre, ne s'appelait jamais caresse" (76). Julie's metamorphosis over the course of the text suggests to the reader that a repressed darkness, rather than disappearing, will eventually resurface and consume everything in sight. Born of a desire to

be rid of the dark forces that reigned there, Julie's flight from "la cabane de B ..." has in fact the opposite effect, turning her into a manifestation of the things that she flees. Julie's spiritual journey to the dark side engulfs not only the convent but also her brother and his wife; the young couple is sacrificed in Julie's ritual initiation. Joseph's desire to reject his dark side makes him a defenseless target for Julie's jealous vengeance, and her destruction of her innocent brother brings with it a metaphor that refers to Jesus's bodily sacrifice: "Le marié porte au côté gauche une déchirure faite au couteau. Si je ne mets pas mes doigts dans la blessure de son côté, je ne croirai pas" (166). Here Julie borrows Thomas' words of disbelief and thus endows her brother with the divine position of Jesus in the text. It is in reality Julie who has supernatural power in the text, and her brother, though symbolizing Jesus, is merely a pawn for her witchcraft.

Unable or unwilling to reject her darker side and be reborn a pure and virginal nun, Julie destroys the very convent that offered "salvation" from the reality of her past: her real identity will not remain hidden, and the necessity of reintegrating her true, darker self wreaks havoc in the falsely pure convent. Julie's reclaiming of the dark, "impure" side of her psyche, much like Elisabeth's descent into her inner "bog woman," recalls the importance given to both light and dark, good and evil, that we find in spiritual thought such as that of Carl Jung: "the marriage of these 'darker' elements of human life with lighter and brighter factors form a totality, allowing mature wisdom to shine through" (81 Salman). The reader must now decide whether Sœur Julie is a victim of the patriarchal community that has enslaved her or an inherently evil creature who leaves nothing but pain and suffering in her wake. The reality of course lies somewhere between the two extremes, with Julie symbolizing the kind of profound self-knowledge that is necessary before one can experience a meaningful spirituality. Julie's violent destruction of convent life in



this text exemplifies the dark but nonetheless necessary awakening of the complete spectrum of human emotion.

As Julie leaves the convent to join her mysterious demon companion, it is clear that the evil that she supposedly embodies will not leave with her, but will instead remain at the convent to continue to call into question the purity of the Catholic institution. In this text the realm of the Sorceress possesses the power to destroy, but what it destroys is not necessarily “good.” Julie’s destruction of the convent has successfully eradicated any clear distinction between good and evil, bringing forth instead the latent fear and hatred that was always present in the sheltered community. This darkness is never more obvious than in the last scene in which the Mère Supérieure and Abbé Flageole suffocate Julie’s newborn child, smothering him to death with fresh snow. Their intent is clearly to end the cycle of evil set in motion by Julie’s presence, but it has in fact the opposite effect: their well-intentioned act makes these two “holy” figures the bearers of evil. No longer neatly contained within the character of Julie, darkness has invaded the convent and its inhabitants. Caught in a double-bind of evil, the Mère Supérieure and the Abbé cannot let the devil’s spawn live, but in killing it they become an important part of the very evil that they are so desperate to banish.

Hébert’s presentation of the Witch figure is clearly full of ambivalence, echoing the Québécois hesitation to reject a religious tradition that makes up a substantial part of their cultural history. It would be an error to read the use of the Witch figure in her novels as a validation of occult practices or as an outright rejection of the Catholic religion; it is rather a symbolic tool used to criticize those aspects of patriarchal society that have limited Québécois women in their life choices. Hébert’s own devout Catholicism followed her throughout her life, subjected nonetheless to questioning and rebellion as her texts reflected. Other later texts, such as

*La Cage*—Hébert’s rewriting of the story of La Corriveau in which the real-life heroine is freed from her death-cage, allow for a more optimistic take on the reinvention of women’s spiritual lives. Prefiguring Hébert’s presentation of a liberated La Corriveau, Louky Bersianik includes the latter in a list of supernatural figures in *L’Euguélonne*. Bersianik’s presentation of the Sorceress is less ambivalent than Hébert’s, who while portraying the Occult Arts as similar and perhaps more gynophilic than the Church’s traditions, has difficulty rejecting the Church of her own childhood. Bersianik’s massive anti-Bible has no such difficulty, validates numerous “good Witches” of literature, removing their frightening masks and revealing them as the embodiment of feminine power and creativity.

The title character of *L’Euguélonne* is herself something of a Sorceress, a supernatural changeling who appears to embody all oppressed and downtrodden women in Québécois history. Appearing before questioning masses of human beings, l’Euguélonne first transforms before their eyes into La Sagouine, the sympathetic crone portrayed in Antonine Maillet’s work by the same name. La Sagouine is a wise old woman dressed up in idiot’s clothing, playing the necessary part in order to get along in society, all the while subverting the rigid system in which she lives. Although she does not mix potions or chant spells, La Sagouine is much like a Sorceress whose art of transformation allows her subversion to remain hidden from those she serves. At the sight of this transformation in which l’Euguélonne “se mit à ressembler à La Sagouine comme une goutte de pluie ressemble parfois à une autre goutte de pluie,” all women who witness this transformation begin to tremble “car, un jour, dans sa jeunesse, la Sagouine avait dit qu’elle voulait TOUT et ce TOUT s’était transformé en un seau d’ordures et d’eau sale” (17). Alain Pontaut refers to “les sortilèges” of La Sagouine in his introduction to the 1990 edition of the text, and to the character’s “spells,” many of which appear to contradict

themselves: “La Sagouine ne sait rien et éclaire tout. La Sagouine n’est rien et elle dit tout” (12). If we can see La Sagouine as recalling the Jungian archetype of the “Wise Old Woman,” then we allow her to embody “supernatural power, vitality, and wisdom...about the deeper meaning of human life” (Salman 79), then her criticism of the Church and of social inequalities are all the more meaningful, and l’Euguélonne’s transformation into the image of La Sagouine will remind the women of Québec of their sordid history: their wise ancestor asked for everything and was given a bin of trash and a bucket of dirty water. The fact that this image causes them to tremble suggests that the women of Québec are now poised to take action against the system that has denied them their heart’s desire. La Sagouine is presented in this text as a powerful voice for the women of Québec, at once supernatural and earth-bound, longing to separate herself from her dishwater and garbage.

La Corriveau makes an appearance, but it is not La Corriveau of Hébert’s play, saved from a cruel death by an act of God. This time we see the real Corriveau, hideously tortured and killed for having been unfaithful to her absent husband: “Elle avait le corps étranglé dans un treillis de fer qui épousait sa chair étroitement. Sa figure était celle d’une suppliciée” (19). Like La Sagouine, La Corriveau’s subversion does not result in an improvement of her own harsh reality, but it allows her death to serve as a reminder of the violence that she endured.

L’Euguélonne continues her transformations into various mythical figures from ages past, including the *Manikoutai* of the native Canadian myth, a progression that suggests a look back in time at the Sorceresses and other untamed women who, throughout the centuries, strengthened Québécois women’s resolve to resist their oppression. The *Manikoutai* is perhaps the most striking of these figures, a pure image of the Sorceress in all her terrifying glory: “Ce n’était pas une femme, c’était la *Manikoutai*. Peau rouge, les cheveux noirs agités comme des rapides, les

quatre saisons dans les yeux. Une vraie sauvagesse” (19). L’Euguélonne’s transformation into Marie-Claire Blais’ *Pauline Archange* emphasizes the rebellious nature of these transformations, for the latter is shown with “les yeux rebelles et le regard dessous, la mèche rebelle et la pensée dessous”. In bringing these many rebellious women of Québécois history into the narrative of *L’Euguélonne*, Bersianik reminds the reader that before her there existed numerous female figures, real or imaginary, who set the stage for her revolutionary text. It is certainly no accident that Bersianik chooses mythical and historical figures of Québécois society, for these are figures who played a role in women’s breaking free from the chains of staunch Catholicism.

L’Euguélonne does not experience this transformation alone, but in the company of brave women from the past and present, as do the women of her fictional “audience” who all have some of these mythical figures inside them. Her final transformation is into the image of the Statue of Liberty, a foreshadowing of l’Euguélonne’s basic purpose in traveling to Québec, to encourage women to remove their spiritual shackles and live in harmony with men rather than in submission to them.

When, at her departure, l’Euguélonne is attacked by an angry woman, she shows that she is above bodily harm: “Dans un éclair, la foule voit l’Euguélonne projetée brutalement jusqu’au fond de l’espace puis en revenir aussi vite comme une balle lancée au mur avec force” (389). Her immunity to physical harm, like the mythical immortality of the Witches of early American history, makes l’Euguélonne the object of violent efforts to eradicate her. The armies that wage war against her are not, however, simply attacking her physical body. It is l’Euguélonne’s subversive message that they seek to destroy with their execution plan. The soldiers blow the messianic figure of l’Euguélonne to pieces, yet moments later she reappears. Bersianik’s clear message is one of solidarity and unity among women, for l’Euguélonne’s immortality comes not

from a magic spell but from her calling to spread her liberating message to women across the universe: “Je vous ai dit que je ne mourrais pas...trop de choses à faire. Programme trop chargé. Pas le temps de crever” (390). It is in this death that Bersianik departs from the Christian analogy and takes advantage of the science-fiction setting to depict a free-floating image of female divinity:

Bersianik’s intended analogy to the Christian Savior is not, however, as systematically sustained as some critics have implied. Indeed, in her radical departure from biblical accounts, Bersianik does not depict the Euguélionne’s death as an agonizing test of filial devotion to a supreme father such as we find in the Christian story nor will her resurrection occur as a gift from God and a sign of spiritual salvation. In the instant after her body is literally blown to bits by rifle fire, the glowing remains of the Euguélionne’s dispersed female form hang momentarily suspended in space...This is a powerful image of spatial expansion, indeterminacy, and free-floating movement in which any male notion of the divine is entirely absent. (Gould *Writing* 161)

L’Euguélionne’s shape-shifting transformations before the stunned masses recall various images of powerful femininity, including the Sorceress, the madwoman, and the old crone. These mythical figures, like the Sorceress in Hébert’s texts, speak to a deep desire on the part of modern Québécois women to separate themselves from the inert religious traditions of their mothers. Their voices resonate in those women who recognize that Québec, though shaped and propelled by the forces of Catholicism, is in need of a profound spiritual shift. The women who comprise l’Euguélionne’s metamorphoses embody not only a rejection of traditional spiritual rules and rituals, but also a positive exploration of a spiritual existence that allows them, at the

very least, supremacy in their own lives. Because their most primal sources of power have been denied and rejected by patriarchal religion, the women in these texts confront the dominant religion of Catholicism with the more gynocentric world of the Occult in an effort to regain some of their lost spiritual power. This significant choice represents a rejection of the basic tenets of the Church, and a growing desire to reinvent their spiritual existence. After all, the act of questioning is the enemy of blind faith, as La Sagouine suggests: “Parce qu’ils nous avont dit déjà que trop se questionner sus les questions arligieuses, ça fait perdre la foi” (112). Although clearly lacking a formal education (as demonstrated here by her strong regional dialect), La Sagouine possesses a wisdom that informs her of the troublesome values of the Church (here, the insistence upon blind faith).

The Sorceress, especially in the metaphorical form that she takes in most works of literature, defies Christian laws of morality and tradition by allowing herself to be driven not by arbitrary laws of men but by the laws of the body, of alchemy, and of nature. The reintegration of these darker, more “real” aspects of the female psyche that we find in many post-Quiet Revolution novels may be read as the birth of a true feminine spirituality, opposed to the Christian tradition in which the feminine spirit is feared rather than exalted. Québécois women have freed themselves from the disturbingly perfect ideal of the Virgin Mary who can hardly be considered as a realistic model for women: “[L]’humanité de la Vierge mère n’est pas toujours évidente, et nous verrons comment, par sa soustraction au péché par exemple, elle se distingue du genre humain” (31). Québécois women seek instead an attainable and realistic image of femininity, one grounded in tangible earthiness rather than esoteric ideals of perfection. The negative elements of these texts, particularly in Hébert’s works where the women characters appear psychologically unstable and destructive, may be seen as allowing these female

characters to “seek to exorcise the dead hand of the past through violence or self-destruction” (Mezei 897). This violence is well overdue, if we accept that the reason that so many women are “à moitié mortes,” as Pol Pelletier writes in the penultimate monologue from *La Nef des Sorcières*, is that they have “tué en elles le désir et l’agressivité” (124). Violence and destruction are an integral part of the female psyche and therefore play a part in Sorcery, perhaps because they are natural, human drives, and because they work to prevent the victimization of women. Unpredictable and frightening, the image of the Witch in Québécois texts refuses the kind of institutionalization endured by the Virgin Mary, and yet the negative aspects of the former contribute to her spiritual richness, especially if we believe that “the often acrid and subtle horrors of spiritual suffering can produce an ultimately sweet and abiding flavor of soul” (Gibson 184).

## Chapter 6 Conclusion

That Québécois women's experience of the divine has traditionally been placed in the context of organized (and usually anti-feminist) religious faith is undeniably true; whether this is the rightful place of spirituality is obviously contestable. Ingman defines women's spirituality as their "recognition of the divine within themselves and in their relationships with others and the world around them" (Ingman 15), but how can women recognize the divine in themselves when they have been told by their Church that they are not formed in the image of God? In the words of l'Euguélienne:

Que les mâles adorent une telle Divinité, cela se comprend...ils s'adorent, ils s'encensent, ils se rendent gloire. Mais que des femmes adorent encore la Divinité mâle qui exige d'elles impérieusement le sacrifice de leur autonomie, cela me dépasse. (266)

The women writers of post-Quiet Revolution Québec realized the great need for a divinity that reflected their experience. The four areas of spiritual "jouissance" that I have discussed all represent specific ways in which women begin to recognize the divine in themselves, thus rejecting the negative image of women as put forth by the Church. In reassigning an important role to creativity and sexuality, these writers refuse the expected repentant position in regards to the pleasures of the body and mind. The reinvention of the maternal role as a choice that should enrich women's lives, rather than an obligation imposed by a patriarchal theology, is intended to imbue relationships between future generations of women



with hope. By validating the figure of the Sorceress, they create a new paradigm wherein powerful women are praised rather than persecuted.

Québec's belated entry into the modern era meant that these writers were faced with the challenge of overcoming the widespread stereotype of a reactionary society peopled by uneducated simpletons, the forgotten step-child of the *mère-patrie*, not to mention the additional negative judgments of women. Yet despite the many mechanisms of oppression at work, the women writers of Québec have held their own in an incomparable way. Unlike the literary canons of Europe and the United States, the canon of Québécois literature is surprisingly full of woman writers; it is even more incredible that a woman—Laure Conan (1845-1924)—would have been among the first to initiate the literary tradition in such a patriarchal province. The unique history of Québec has left its mark on Québécois women, in turn shaping their literary history. The desire to speak out and be heard, the refusal to silently accept one's given role, these are all traits that have been passed down through generations of women writers in Québec. This heritage is celebrated in all of the texts that I have studied, including Jovette Marchessault in whose texts the relationships between generations of women are depicted in epic proportions:

Souvent l'impression que toute ma vie j'ai vécu dans l'énorme monologue anonyme de ma grand-mère, de ma mère, parole non-reconnue qui me mettait le cœur à vif mais me donnait itou une joie aussi soudaine que celle d'ouvrir une porte sur la mer. (Mauguière "Critique" 635)

Marchessault goes on to say that this cross-generational discussion is the very reason that she writes, "pour entendre à nouveau cette voix unique, continuer la chaîne parlée, parlante du langage des mères" (Mauguière "Critique" 635). It is not only biological mothers who are part of this dialogue, but symbolic mothers as well: Marchessault's *La Saga des poules mouillées*

portrays an imaginary conversation between women authors including the first Québécois novelist Laure Conan, Anne Hébert, and the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century writer Gabrielle Roy. In depicting the eternal dialogue between women, Marchessault sets an important precedent for woman writers of Québec; her textual conversations between these illustrious female ancestors, thinkers and writers, remind us that there is much to be gained from listening to those who came before. Her insistence on a tradition of women's writing in Québec allows her to "s'affirmer en tant que telle, de se réclamer d'une filiation, de rompre l'isolement dans lequel se trouve toute femme qui écrit afin de ne plus être 'les enfants uniques nés de père et mère inconnues'" (Mauguière 636).

This underlying theme of a dialogue between generations of Québécois women is present in all of the texts that I have studied, creating a sense of history in a domain that has often been neglected in the historical record. In refusing death, ("Moi, dit l'Euguélonne, je ne mourrai pas" [384]), l'Euguélonne provides a metaphor for the connectedness of all women across generations, thus repairing many ills that have been done to women of the past and could recur in the future. Bersianik's utopian society, in which gender and hierarchy have no standing, is built on a foundation of women who, consciously or not, are dependent upon each other:

Comme des somnabules, nous avons marché l'une derrière l'autre à travers l'histoire sans regarder où nous mettions le pied. Notre mémoire s'était retirée et nous vivions à marée basse sans comprendre les signaux laissés par nous sur le sable, sans nous soucier de la trace friable de nos pas sur le sable. Les pas de l'une dans les pas de l'autre, comme si une seule d'entre nous était passée. (Bersianik qtd in Weil 10)

Bersianik's utopia is reflected in Blais' text *L'Ange de la Solitude* in which the "filles" provide material and emotional support to each other, and even the death of one of them cannot

break their spiritual bond. Like those women writers speaking to Marchessault from beyond the grave, the departed Gérard does not simply die but transforms herself into a muse for the other “filles,” encouraging them to shake off their creative blocks and write, sing, dance, act.

While Blais finds her community of women living in a bohemian artist’s loft, Hébert reaches further back for her legacy. Somewhat torn between the new paradigm and the old (Hébert would remain a practicing Catholic throughout her life, although critical of some of the Church’s stances), it should be no surprise that her actress-mother character Flora Fontanges finds community within the “first ladies” of Québec. The frequent visits by characters from the past would suggest that these women have something very important to tell her. Barbe Abbadie reminds Flora of the many women who died in childbirth in the early years of the province, bringing a level of humanity to the nameless dead (53). Guillemette Thibault’s appearance reminds her of the generations of women who were not allowed to practice the profession of their choice: although Guillemette proves herself to be a talented blacksmith, she is forced to enter the convent. She consequently gives up her own name, taking the name “Agnès-de-la-Pitié” (87).

Like Flora’s own search for a name and an identity of her own, Guillemette’s loss of a name speaks to Québécois women’s deep-seated need to find a place in their own society. The strong heritage of women that we find in Québec’s literature is a necessary part in the new affirmation of women’s spiritual identity in recent decades. The appearances of these women from the past serve to bring to light historic oppressions, encouraging Flora in the constant search for an identity that is hers alone. This legacy of women who regularly visit Flora serves as a metaphor for the long legacy of women in literature, as well as a sign of Hébert’s awareness

that she stands on the shoulders of women writers of the past who, like her, have questioned the ideology of their day.

These new writers show us that the process of freeing women from the patriarchal (and in this instance, Catholic) limitations of their past involves passing on new beliefs and values from generation to generation. In this way the relationship between grandmother, mother and daughter presents itself not only as a possible means of spiritual fulfillment but as a necessary part in the healing both of the “battle of the sexes” and of relationships between women. The creation of symbolic communities of women in these texts is, essentially, a political act that not only represents change in the province but encourages a new mentality with regard to women. By “political” I refer not merely to the governmental systems of the province and beyond, but to the more general sense of the term as stated by Kate Millett, for whom it is “a set of stratagems designed to maintain a system” (23). In this instance the “system” is that of patriarchy, which certainly includes—but is not limited to—the governmental realm. The work of the writer thus becomes a collective effort to increase awareness about issues that affect all women.

The literary rendering of women’s spiritual and psychological awakening could therefore be seen as an incubation period for the birth of a more tangible, socially and politically relevant awakening. Numerous texts that I have studied—most notably, those of Louky Bersianik—bear witness to an increasing presence of politicized discourse among women. This is not a change that would be approved by the traditional authorities of the Church, who maintain that women are too delicate for serious involvement in anything besides raising children and tending house. John XXIII sternly dissuaded women from such work outside the home, calling it “humiliating and mortifying” and prone to making one tired and dulling the personality. He beseeches women to “not let their contacts with the harsh realities of outside work dry up the richness of their inner

life, the resources of their sensitivity, or their open and delicate spirit” (Gudorf 275). Our writers do not accept this scare tactic, recognizing it for what it is: a thinly veiled manipulation aimed at keeping women out of powerful positions and in the home where they are more easily controlled.

The problematic treatment of women by the patriarchal Church is the target of social commentary within all of the texts that I have studied, suggesting that Québécois literature is indeed in the process of extending beyond the intellectual world into the political and social realm:

La paternité a fait son temps. Dans un parti pris politique et romantique d'égalité et de démocratisation, la Révolution tranquille a miné les chaires et les monuments, coupé les amarres avec la tradition. La cathédrale littéraire, élevée au milieu des champs catholiques et nationalistes, a été engloutie. Il ne doit rester aucun vestige d'un passé, aussi court qu'encombrant, et vive le roman... libre!  
(Poulin 117)

The “literary cathedral” is indeed being torn down by these authors, and its foundations reformed to include the gender that has long been mysteriously absent. It is especially appropriate that these writers use the genre of the novel to channel the subversion of the patriarchal viewpoint in Québec, for in the view of the traditionalists of the era of the *roman de la terre*, “[n]ovels, unless didactic and moral, were condemned by the Church as dangerous” (Mezei 896). If by dangerous we mean threatening to the patriarchal power of the Church, this certainly holds true for the women writers that I have studied. The enemies that these writers are battling—sexism, repression, homophobia—although intimately tied to spiritual identity, are not mere esoteric ideals. They are at the very center of many of the most important political, social, and spiritual questions of the day. The new spiritual ideologies represented in these texts do not

only reflect the changing values of the time, they seem to spur social change as well. This is especially true in the texts of Louky Bersianik, who incites her readers to revolt against the status quo by following her example: “[J]e sors du silence soi-disant congénital des femmes (anciennes ou contemporaines), et qui sait où ça va nous mener?” (*Pique-nique* 52).

The women of post-Quiet Revolution Québec seek to erase the line between the realm of the imagination and the realm in which real and lasting change in society may be undertaken: “Un livre est-il un château de verre? Il le serait si on arrivait à y voir au travers. Et que l’invisible soit rendu visible. Et que ce qu’il y a hors les murs traverse les murs et soit devant” (*Le Pique-nique* 30). The “invisible” that must be rendered “visible” is, of course, the changes effected not only on the psychic level of fictional characters but also in the social and political realm. The purpose of these texts is to bring change into existence—not only as abstract ideas but as real social and political change. If real change is to occur, these texts must literally “pour” their ink on the earth, as in the words of l’Euguélionne: “Qu’est-ce qu’un écrivain si non quelqu’un qui répand de l’encre sur la Terre?” (*L’Euguélionne* 398). The true utopia sought by these writers is not the transplanetary voyage of l’Euguélionne, the spiritual maternity of la Mère des Herbes and la Grande Oursonne, or the physical and spiritual union of “les filles,” but the possibility of a future in which the condescending, exclusionary policies of an ancient institution such as the Catholic Church no longer occupy an unjust position of power over thinking people.

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