

Originary Grammarians: Laure Conan and Sheila Watson

... l'acte d'écrire se scruta jusqu'en l'origine.
Stéphane Mallarmé

I wish to address the fiction of Laure Conan and Sheila Watson, both of whom in their respective language traditions may be considered grammarians of origin. Both inaugurate a certain discourse, and the discourse of both writers is an exposition of the language of fiction at a zero grade. Certain objections need to be raised initially to this decision. First is the question of chronology, and second is the question of procedure. Conan's novel *Angéline de Montbrun*, which I have chosen to examine, was first published in installments in *La Revue canadienne* in 1881-82. Sheila Watson's fiction dates from the 1950s. Despite the historical gap and all that it implies, I want to argue that they are near contemporaries, at least with respect to the kinds of problems they raise. The second objection is that I may be falling into the trap of what should be called classical comparative Canadian literature. By that phrase, I mean both a method and an ideology. The method is implicit in Lorne Pierce's *An Outline of Canadian Literature*, in which he proposes that the anglophone and francophone literatures of Canada ought to be studied 'side by side'.¹ This is a suggestion that is generally followed, principally in the criticism of Ronald Sutherland and Clément Moisan.² The procedure of both critics is to pair off writers according to the themes they share. A consequence of the method is

its tendency to make a particular notion of Canada the referent for the themes, and thus to reify them. There are a number of problems that such a method raises. The worst of these is that once one has demonstrated that two literatures are in most respects alike there is little reason to go on comparing them.

It is not my intent, however, to examine the texts of Conan and Watson because they share the same theme, but rather because they are exercised by the same problematic, which is the inauguration of a certain discourse. They differ, therefore, in a significant fashion from the texts employed by Sutherland and Moisan, inasmuch as they do not end in themselves but constitute a continuously opening scene. This is the first and most obvious sense in which they are grammarians of origin. The argument for Watson has been eloquently made by Stephen Scobie in a recent monograph, in which he neatly distinguishes Watson from what he calls 'earlier prose fiction in Canada.' Under that rubric he includes Frederick Philip Grove, Morley Callaghan, and Hugh MacLennan. She does not culminate their work; she is rather 'at the start' of the modern movement.³ The situation of Laure Conan is clearly different, but one might readily argue that the *roman du terroir*, the genre which dominated earlier prose fiction in Quebec, was firmly, if perhaps unconsciously, subverted in *Angéline de Montbrun*. Conan was also credited from the start with being the first Canadian francophone psychological novelist, an honour she shares, one might observe, with Mme de la Fayette.

It is not, however, for this reason entirely that I wish to address the texts of Watson and Conan. The other origin with which their work is inscribed is the problem of writing. This is not a new problem, although we have made it appear new, and its newness is of a particular character in both of these writers. One might wish to assert that this is because they are both women entering a tradition perceptibly dominated by male writers. It must be borne in mind, however, that neither writer would call herself a feminist, despite what would appear to be a shared necessity in their respective work. How thoroughly, then, that point can be argued I would like to hold in a certain suspense.

No reading of Conan is unmediated. *Angéline de Montbrun* was followed almost immediately into the world by an article by Henri-Raymond Casgrain, a priest who was fond of talking of Canadian liter-

1 Lorne Pierce, *An Outline of Canadian Literature* (French and English) (Montreal and New York: Carrier 1927), 'Foreword,' n.p.

2 Sutherland has published two collections of essays, both of which develop his positions in various ways. See *Second Image: Comparative Studies in Québec/Canadian Literature* (Don Mills: New Press 1971) and *The New Hero: Essays in Comparative Québec/Canadian Literature* (Toronto: Macmillan 1970). Moisan has published a general study, *L'Âge de la littérature canadienne* (Montréal: Hurtubise HMH 1966) and a more specifically literary work, *Poésie des frontières: étude comparée des poésies canadienne et québécoise* (LaSalle: Hurtubise HMH 1979).

3 Stephen Scobie, 'Sheila Watson,' in *Canadian Writers and Their Works*, Robert Lecker, Jack David, and Ellen Quigley, eds. (Toronto: ECW Press 1985) 264.

ature as 'un père de sa fille,' whose mission was to 'moraliser le peuple.'⁴ For Casgrain, Conan was an exemplary father to her daughter, the French-Canadian reader. And no wonder, for few texts in nineteenth-century Québec are so heavily intertextual, its references ranging widely in the biblical and sermon tradition of Christian writing. Conan's heroine is, furthermore, an exemplary daughter to her father, prepared to sacrifice happiness, conjugal bliss, and life itself at the loss of her own father. Gilles Marcotte, without overlooking earlier novels written in Canada, remarks that: 'Le premier personnage du roman né au Canada français s'appelle Angéline de Montbrun,'⁵ and he assesses Conan's achievement with one further succinct observation: 'elle inaugure au Canada français une intuition de la misère qui restera l'apanage de toute une lignée de romancières et poétesses, jusqu'à la Gabrielle Roy de *Bonheur d'occasion*.'⁶ I would modify this judgment in two ways. First, there is no need to use the feminine for 'novelist' and 'poet,' nor need one conclude with *Bonheur d'occasion*. The links with Anne Hébert and Marie-Claire Blais, not to speak of Saint-Denis Garneau, are even more emphatic. Following Jean Le Moyne's assertion that 'il serait difficile de trouver dans notre littérature un livre plus malsain qu'*Angéline de Montbrun*,'⁷ Marcotte remarks that Conan's contemporaries, not to speak of Conan himself, must have been astonished, not to say scandalized, by a novel so devoted to the austerities of the secular religious life. Finally, without elaboration, he asserts that Conan's novel, the first French-Canadian novel worthy of the name, emerges in a tradition that is '[n]é dans sa propre négation' and 'continue dans l'équivoque.'⁸ Marcotte is unquestionably correct to say that earlier French-Canadian narrative prose was for the most part self-negating, and this accords with the official attitude toward the novel in Québec in the nineteenth century.⁹ Equivocation, then, would appear to be the only viable posture for someone assuming the role of novelist in Québec for the first time.

Conan's first move was to assert the primary, fictive quality of her novel by avoiding from the start the use of an extra-diegetic narrator

common to the *roman du terroir*. This means that, with the exception of the novel's brief centre section, she avoids the ideological overdetermination of novels such as *Jean Rivard*, placing a heavy burden of concretization upon the reader.¹⁰ As we shall see, in the one instance in which a narrator is used, the reader is urged to enter the text even more actively than one might expect. The novel, then, is designed to display on more than one level the resources of fiction, especially its penchant for the equivocal. It is divided into three parts, each evincing a different narrative mode; and the first and last letters and diary respectively are modes generally characteristic of women's prose. Its first part is an exchange of letters, mainly between Maurice and his sister Mina about Angéline. There are two letters from Angéline, two from her father, and a subtextual exchange between Mina and a friend who becomes a nun. The second section is given a narrative voice, and it is designed to recount laconically, but with revealing hesitations and reconsiderations, the tragic centre of the narrative. The final section is comprised of Angéline's diary.

The novel, then, is almost suffocatingly *littéraire*. This is especially noticeable in the author's efforts, which may appear maladroit, to stay strictly within an adopted mode. As a result, when Maurice asks for Angéline's hand in marriage from her father, there is an exchange of letters, even though they are living under the same roof. Thus the reader is absolutely dependent upon character focalization. Because the discourse that the characters use is in every respect profoundly dependent upon Conan's own reading, which is fundamentally Romantic in its reflection of Chateaubriand, Hugo and Musset, as well as devotional texts, one is not expected to envision the characters as anything more than *actants* whose function is to urge what must appear as the opposing positions of youthful love that fades like nature and of religious responsibility which claims for itself an eternal permanence. Maurice, of course, encodes the first discourse and M. de Montbrun encodes the second. Both contend discursively, in effect, for Angéline's heart and soul. What we must consider is the character of the opposition, how it is resolved, and what the resolution implies.

The opposition is declared on the first page of the novel. It begins with an epigraph from the Jesuit, Lacordaire, who asks: 'L'avez-vous

¹⁰ Not only is the extra-diegetic narrator an obtrusive guide in these novels, his role is nicely manipulated in the final part of *Jean-Rivard, économiste*, where he becomes homo-diegetic, as well, entering his own text, thus guaranteeing his special authority.

4 Laurent Mailhot, *La Littérature québécoise* (Paris: PUF 1974) 28

5 Gilles Marcotte, *Une Littérature qui se fait* (Montréal: HMH 1962) 16

6 Marcotte, 19

7 Jean Le Moyne, *Convergences* (Montréal: HMH 1961) 89

8 Marcotte, 17

9 Cf. Yves Dostaler, *Les Infortunes du roman dans le Québec du XIXe siècle* (Montréal: Hurtubise HMH 1977).

cru que cette vie fût la vie?¹¹ Clearly 'cette vie' refers to Maurice's position, a position which is as much a code as anything else. The code is that love is nature, that Angéline's 'estate' is the terrestrial paradise, and that she is the flower that can be no other than the synecdoche for paradise. Thus she is, to use J. Hillis Miller's gnomic expression, 'a figure of a figure.'¹² The figure, however, is only illusory; and, like the terrestrial paradise, a figure of our origin, it is no longer accessible. Thus inscribed in the code is the fact that any Christian would recognize: Angéline's estate is a false metaphor. As a consequence, Angéline cannot be what she appears to be in Maurice's eyes. Maurice, himself the synecdoche of youth and innocence — of life unaware of the Fall — sends a note down the hall, one presumes, to Angéline's father, seeking her hand. M. de Montbrun consults his daughter (face to face, one hopes) and sends the following reply: 'Elle n'a pas refusé, mais elle déclare qu'elle ne consentira jamais à se séparer de moi' (p. 38). He then adds an observation that cannot but appear curious: 'Faites vos réflexions, mon cher, et voyez si vous avez quelque objection à m'épouser' (p. 38). He finally explains why he has made such a stipulation. Angéline has been his, in effect, from the moment she became, as a child, an orphan, to use M. de Montbrun's word, upon the death of her mother. And in place of the mother whom she seeks, he places himself, desiring that 'elle fût la fille de mon âme comme de mon sang' (p. 39). He then asks: 'et qui pourrait dire jusqu'à quel point cette double parenté nous attache l'un à l'autre?' (p. 39). This is the question that the novel intends to answer.

The answer does not come immediately, for two steps intervene. The first is the conventional agreement that Angéline's father enjoins upon Maurice to go abroad and wait for a year. Conan knows, of course, that this is merely a convention, and of that trip only one letter is provided. It portrays Maurice still in search of a non-existent ideal, in this instance of France, the mother-country, which has so far fallen from grace that Québec, true to pre-Revolutionary faith, has become a land of exile. Not only does this prefigure the psychological scene of the subsequent two parts of the novel, but it also reminds the reader of the symbolic absence of the mother everywhere in the book. For

just as Angéline's mother dies early in her life, so too are Maurice and his sister orphans, and all of them look upon M. de Montbrun as father to them all. And Maurice cannot write further of France, for to do so appears to him as if he were about to 'insulter ma mère' (p. 82). Yet, there is no discourse of the mother in the text, except as a Mother Superior of a convent, nor is there any other discourse for a woman except as a virgin, both of which conflate in the image of the Virgin Mary.

Neither Mothers Superior nor Virgin are, as I shall indicate, a woman's discourse, but proceed from the discourse of the father. This discourse is made possible in the novel through the singular character of his death and its sequel. M. de Montbrun dies in the central, narrative section not long after — in fact one is tempted to say coterminously with — Maurice's return. The father, consciously or not, commits suicide. The author does not choose to risk his dying in the code of the amorous letter-writers, and so gives the facts through a narrator as dryly as possible. She reports that M. de Montbrun had a passion for hunting. One day in September, she writes, 'comme il en revenait, il embarrassa son fusil entre les branches d'un arbre; le coup partit et le blessa mortellement' (p. 86). What is striking about the report is the minimal effort that is made to achieve an effect of verisimilitude. Once his rifle is tangled up, everything happens without motivation: the gun went off and wounded him mortally. His death also brings Angéline almost to death's door. Her 'santé magnifique' fails, and she becomes the victim of 'defaillances subites' (p. 87). As a result, one day visiting his grave, 'elle tomba sur le pavé et se fit au visage des contusions qui eurent des suites fort graves. Tellement qu'il fallut en venir à une opération dont la pauvre enfant resta défigurée' (p. 87). In medical history such an effect is next to impossible. It ought to be evident, nevertheless, that Conan's intent is not mimetic, and this is particularly apparent when one compares this version of her disfiguring with that of the rejected first edition. There she writes: 'Il lui vint au visage une tumeur qui résista à tous les traitements et nécessita à la fin une opération qui la laissa défigurée.'¹³ In this version, Conan's text is purely symbolic. In the later, canonical version, she pretends to be mimetic, by adding the crucial element of the fall. She also retains the image of the *pavé*, which in the first version appears as 'le pavé qui le [le père] couvre.' Thus the *pavé* is intimately related to the act of disfiguration, and in each case disfiguration is related to the father's death.

¹¹ Laure Conan, *Angéline de Montbrun* (Montréal and Paris: Fides 1967) 15. All further references in the text are from this edition.

¹² J. Hillis Miller, ' "Herself Against Herself": The Clarification of Clara Middleton,' in *The Representation of Women in Fiction*, Selected Papers from the English Institute, 1981, New Series, No. 7, Carolyn G. Heilbrun and Margaret Higonnet, eds. (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins Press 1983) 99

¹³ See *La Revue canadienne*, Nouvelle série, 17 année (1881) 721.

The final problem is Maurice, and he is dealt with in an equally makeshift fashion. First the narrator remarks that despite Angéline's disfiguration, 'Son malheur, ses souffrances la lui avaient rendue encore plus chère' (p. 87). Two sentences later, however, the narrator observes 'lorsque sa fiancée eut perdu le charme enchanté de sa beauté, le cœur de Maurice Darville se refroidit, ou plutôt la divine folie de l'amour s'envola' (p. 87). This expression appears to reflect Maurice's discursive code, but the manner of removing a locus of motivation is the narrator's. Both M. de Montbrun and Maurice appear to share the same debt to destiny. In any event, the lack of motivation permits Angéline to return Maurice's ring, leaving her free of erotic attachments. No sooner is she free than she returns from the father's tomb to her estate at Valriant, where the final section entitled 'Feuilles Detachées,' rather than *journal intime*, begins. She is now no longer the 'pauvre enfant' – the non-speaking subject of the middle section. The rest of the novel, with the exception of a letter from a missionary and Maurice, in which he continues to protest his undying love, is in her voice. It is as if the whole novel, from the frivolous first part, that reverses our expectations of marriage, through the hastily conceived account of the second, has brought us to this part – the diary – which is conventionally employed to reveal the secret. To examine that secret I want to return to Angéline's disfiguration and inquire into its meaning.

What are the conditions that allow her not simply to write, but in writing to determine the significance of the novel? The first thing Conan wants us to know is that Angéline's new estate is inscribed with the discontinuous: her journal is composed of leaves that are *détachées*. The origin of this discontinuity is the death of the father. The mark of discontinuity is her disfiguration acquired in striking the *pavé*, whether it be the pavement or the cover of her father's tomb. In that act she is barred in a certain sense from any completion of herself as a subject, and her writing, a mode of figuring herself, is also the gesture by which she continually loses face in losing the 'figure.' Her strategy is self-allusively¹⁴ recursive. Her desire is to rewrite the original text of the novel as a possible mode of self-discovery. Her text, however, is not exclusively nostalgic. It also looks forward in time, seeking the place of the father. Thus the *pavé*, which causes the mark of her disfiguration and emphasizes her physical *différence* from her past and her

father, is posited again in the *grève*, the shoreline, which is the frequent place of her solitary walks. She is meant to be a divided figure – dis-figured, apart – apparently split by father and lover. But her first entry in her journal is addressed to her father as if he were more powerfully on her mind than Maurice: 'mon père,' as well as 'mon Dieu,' are in the vocative, and 'Maurice' is relegated to the accusative. Her true addressee is her father, and behind him, God. It ought to be observed, in fact, that only her father is addressed in the first entry of the original version, and for reasons, one suspects, of propriety, Maurice is admitted to the approved version. One cannot help assert, then, that her disfiguration is a deliberately awkward, and therefore emphatic, way of suggesting that M. de Montbrun's death is the first act in a sequence that leads to her defloration. No longer a flower, she can have no more significance for Maurice.

The disfiguration, however, is the act that permits her self-figuration. As I have said, the act of figuring bears in two directions in which 'Maurice' becomes the sign of nostalgia and 'mon père' the sign of longing. The folding back that her journal takes upon the epistolary section of the novel reminds one of Derrida's essay 'Living On: Border Lines' in which he develops the notion of the 'double invagination' by which a text, constantly folding in upon itself, is produced. Indeed, his remarks on Maurice Blanchot's *L'Arrêt de mort*, a title that Geoffrey Hartman translates ambiguously as 'death sentence' or 'suspension of death,'¹⁵ would appear to apply nicely to Conan's text as well:

The *arrêt de mort* – what is designated by the title of the book and of the "totality" of a *récit* that is never gathered together to form one *récit* and that thus questions even the unity of its "title," as well as the unity of the narrator – the *arrêt de mort* would thus follow this "double bond" whose terrifying *figura*, figure, face, traverses the *récit* that is forbidden, interdicted in the quasi-middle of it, over above beyond its double inner border.¹⁶

It could be argued, I think, that Angéline's text emerges precisely from a stay of death which literally and figuratively *sente* her, for her ability to produce a text is only made possible by her father's death and her quasi-death, in her intransigent decision to withdraw from the world or, to use Conan's word, to 'se *démondaniser*' (p. 51). Further-

¹⁵ See Jacques Derrida, 'Living On: Border Lines,' trans. James Hulbert, in *Deconstruction & Criticism* (New York: The Seabury Press 1979) 109.

¹⁶ Derrida, 'Living On,' 166

¹⁴ Cf. Rosmarin Heidenreich, 'Narrative Strategies in Laure Conan's *Angéline de Montbrun*,' *Canadian Literature* 81 (Summer 1979) 43.

more, the central section serves almost brutally as a 'double inner border' that at once divides and connects, bonding doubly, serving as a threshold for a figure that is also a title, but a hybrid title, an appendage and a possession of a patronym.

As much, however, as I would wish to argue that *Angéline de Montbrun* is an example of a hymeneal text – and formally it may so be construed – I would rather direct attention to the psychological invagination that occurs in the father's death. For, while he dies physically, he becomes the other that Angéline as subject must contend with in her text. Not only does the text of the diary complete the prolepses of the initial section, but also the father as ideology steadily dominates the daughter's text. He becomes both the name for the place of exile and the embodiment of ecclesiastical values. In both instances, the invocation of his name – Lacan's 'le Nom-du-Père' and all that that implies¹⁷ – is designed to resituate the illusion of the terrestrial paradise into the ideology of patriarchy. Thus the reference to Jacques Cartier, the founder/author of Canada as name and place where arrived 'en y plantant la croix' (p. 29), is later recalled in the diary in the figure of François-Xavier Garneau, the historian who authors Canada as fatherland, and to whom Angéline would have liked to have spoken 'l'adieu suprême au nom de la patrie' (p. 163). Elsewhere, in recollecting her father's final moments, Angéline is given a vision of her father, who appears analogous to Christ, and sometimes it is difficult to distinguish her father in heaven from God Himself.

Because the philosophical subtext of the novel is Christian Platonism, the novel easily makes use of implicit analogies. The epigraph, which plays off the sense of 'this life' with 'the life,' directs the reader to this immediately. Thus an invisible line is drawn through the text, which is visually recalled in the metaphors of the *parvé*, the *grève*, and the mark of Angéline's disfiguration. The function of the line is to remind us of the possibility of connection and the reality of separation. If I might return to Lacan again, let me suggest that one way of understanding the ease with which Angéline acquires speech is as a result of the initial lack of a mother and the imaginary in her life and the continuous presence of the father and his symbolic role. She speaks, therefore, in his place and in his absence. Thus she is given the gift of speech through his authority, but at the same time her speech is condemned to a level of perpetual desire. This means, to follow Lacan, that her text is a sustained metonymical invocation of the father from whose

presence she is barred. For this is precisely the role of metonymy – to prevent the acquisition of being. The father, then, is at once the author and, as the 'Nom- [and Non] du-Père,' the one who prevents such acquisition. According to Lacan, this happens in the father's death, the moment when he becomes 'le Père symbolique en tant qu'il signifie cette Loi est bien le Père mort.'¹⁸

The father, then, institutes the law of displacement that governs both the theme of exile and Angéline's text. But displacement prevents the acquisition of life on the other side of death, the true life, as well as the complete recuperation of the subject. It facilitates, as a recompense, the illusion of similitude, and thus 'Montbrun's Angéline,' as we might translate the title, becomes the author of a homotext into which the father's values are inserted. Thus I must argue against Madeleine Gagnon-Mahoney, who proposes a reading of the novel that asserts that the myth of the Conquest is replaced by a myth of female possession.¹⁹ Angéline's inheritance, which not only renounces the kinds of myths of possession in the *roman du terroir*, but also produces the grammar for the myth of dispossession, is figured by her love for her father, his inheritance of all that is his, and her desire to be the sign of displacement in the novel, accepting her castration in her refusal to marry Maurice as a disfiguration of love. Her desire for her father is the mark of her inscription, as Luce Irigaray argues, into the same,²⁰ that is, into the homotext of the father.

Here, I take it, the meaning of Angéline's sacrifice is situated, but it would be wrong to pity her or to look up on it as unhealthy. For Conan's text has the singular merit of avoiding the jingoistic ideology of the dominant sub-genre of the nineteenth century in Québec by refusing to be positive about the Chruich, the family, and the fatherland. As a consequence, while it is not possible to perceive women as women either in the *roman du terroir* or in *Angéline de Montbrun*, at least in the latter the reader is shown why there are no women and how the dominant ideology militated against their existence. To this extent, at least, *Angéline de Montbrun* is a novel of the future, and in its displacement opening a space for the replacement with which we are now more familiar.

¹⁸ Lacan, 556

¹⁹ Madeleine Gagnon-Mahoney, 'Angéline de Montbrun: le mensonge historique et la subversion de la métaphore blanche,' *Voix et Images du Pays* 5 (1972) 57-68

²⁰ Luce Irigaray, *Speculum, de l'autre femme* (Paris: Minuit 1974) 64

It is at precisely this point that I wish to address the text of Sheila Watson. It would be perhaps natural of me to discuss her novel, *The Double Hook*, for this is the text on which her reputation is based, and the text, more than any other, to which most experimental English-Canadian writers of the last two decades have turned. Through Watson 'they have seen,' as Stephen Scobie remarks, 'that it is the language itself that must first be redeemed.'²¹ This is also the burden of Barbara Godard's essay on *The Double Hook*, in which, despite her feminist reading, she argues that 'Where speech fails, Watson is at the point of awareness of a transcendent presence in the world, the Logos which validates the word.'²² Such an argument, which has been given a certain balance in Dawn Rae Downton's response to it, clearly emphasizes Watson's role as an originary grammarian. Watson's effect, one might say, on anglophone writing in Canada has been, like Mallarmé's, to 'donner un sens plus pur au langage du tribu.'²³ This is an enterprise she shares with Conan, especially to the degree that she is aware that writing is re-writing, the laying bare of other texts.

I have chosen to examine her five stories because this project is in many ways more clearly evident in them than in the novel. For the novel, by contrast, has a plot, and part of the function of the plot is to follow a pastoral pattern of regeneration that returns the son, who murders his mother, 'into the first pasture of things.'²⁴ It is a conclusion which, despite the final word being given to Coyote, is heavily coloured by the language of Roman Catholic liturgy that Felix Prosper endeavours continually to recollect. This view is only reinforced by Watson's later remark that she was uncertain whether she would use Coyote again if she re-wrote the novel.²⁵

The stories, however, are often overlooked, despite the fact that they were written in the early fifties and are thus contemporaneous with the novel. They also have the advantage of possessing only the merest of plots, which forces the reader to seek other dominants. It is in this light that it ought to be pointed out that they remain among the most

²¹ Scobie, 275.

²² Barbara Godard, 'Between One Cliché and Another': Language in *The Double Hook*, *Studies in Canadian Literature* 3:2 (Summer 1978) 164.

²³ Cf. Scobie, 275.

²⁴ Sheila Watson, *The Double Hook* (1959: rpt. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart 1969) 131.

²⁵ Sheila Watson, 'What I'm Going to Do,' *Open Letter*, Third Series #1 (Winter 1974-75) 183.

extraordinary stories published in English Canada, and certainly in the 1950s this was true without qualification. By contrast, extraordinary as *The Double Hook* is, its plot and ideological emphasis upon renewal mark it in many ways as more traditional. The stories are normally divided into two parts — the four whose central characters are Oedipus and his family, and another entitled 'And the Four Animals.' The first group, then, falls into what is often noted as a frequent Canadian thematic cluster. They address family life. Any family, however, of which a central figure is named 'Oedipus' quickly calls into question even Canadian families, but a moment's reflection on *Angéline de Montbrun* suggests curious similarities. It will be recalled that her father agreed to permit her marriage to Maurice so long as Maurice was prepared to marry him. That may have appeared to be a metaphorical request in the first part of the novel, but by the conclusion one may be justified in construing a literal meaning as well. Furthermore, Maurice's sister Mina was also quite interested in marrying M. de Montbrun, who served both families as father. Within the layers of meaning that the novel thrives upon, Mina would have become her brother's step-mother. I hesitate to say what relationship Maurice would have borne to Angéline's father. It is clarified, however, by Jane Gallop's comments on Irigaray, who 'uncovers a sublimated male homosexuality structuring all our institutions: pedagogy, marriage, commerce, even Freud's theory of so-called heterosexuality. Those structures necessarily exclude women, but are unquestioned because sublimated — raised from suspect homosexuality to secure homology, to the sexually indifferent logos, science, logic.'²⁶

But the mess of families is nothing new, as Watson's choice of Oedipus reminds us. The new is within the process of uncovering and recovering, and Conan and Watson are both experts in the art of uncovering, at least. Where Conan's emphasis is on the function of writing, Watson's is more appropriately seen in her understanding of speech, but speech as a level of text, and not simply dialogue. I wish, therefore, to distinguish speech as possessing in its logos some primal authority from speech as a part of writing, in which the function of speech is to question the validity of primal authority. It is at this level, I would propose, that Watson's Oedipus asks to be understood, that is, as a figure always talking about origins and, if I may say so, anti-origins, but always using language to throw origins into a regis-

ter in which their primal significance is removed by being stroked out. Thus at the beginning of the first story, 'Brother Oedipus,' we find him brooding on the problem of relationships, a natural problem for Oedipus indeed: 'I have always been self-conscious,' said Puss, 'but I have solved the problem of relationships. I have gone back to the elemental womb, tomb — cave, grave. I have taken refuge in the arched earth cave.' 27 Except for the nickname 'Puss,' it would appear that Watson's procedure here is to take an aspect of the myth to one of its extremes, and to suggest that his relationship with his mother is at once 'elemental' and ambiguous, but no more ambiguous than the Sophoclean version. But we cannot remove his nickname, for this is a strategy that makes Oedipus, who was never like us, like us. In fact, he is, as the first words of the story state, 'Our brother' (p. 9), a phrase which intimately relates us to him. Thus we are not disarmed to discover that he is sometimes called 'Old Puss,' 'Puss-Puss' or 'Boots,' names which, at the very least, hint at Oedipus's hybrid, androgynous character. But what is the elemental, hollow space to which he has returned? It is a willow that 'seemed to shut us off from a world of honking cars and cycling children' (p. 11). Its branches are also 'yellow-curved to the earth' (p. 11), a phrase which recalls the narrator's image of his mother: 'Yellow as the map of China, criss-crossed with isobars' (p. 10). This is a paradigm that is sustained in his exchange with his brother, in which he proposes pulling out the willow. Then, he says, 'You would have your cave; the thing is probably rooted in hell' (p. 11). To which Oedipus replies: 'I rather suspect ... that it is rooted in our mother's drain' (p. 11). Origin is distributed everywhere in the space of a few pages, appearing equally in the colour yellow and Oedipus's mother's drain.

Why, then, one wants to ask, has Watson returned to myth? For one of the functions of myth is to provide a narrative for etiology, and another, as Lévi-Strauss argues, is to establish discovery procedures. Watson, it would appear, has chosen myth because it provides a ground for such expectations, and it, therefore, allows her to move through zones where the mimetic would not be required. As a consequence, Watson is free to make use of one of myth's primary abilities: no matter how enigmatic, the narrative is a fiction that contains a truth. Indeed, the narrative produces it, but the mere invocation of ancient myth in particular requires that one fiction, at least, is entering another — if this is the right metaphor — which is enough to alter the reader's

perception of truth. An instance of this occurs in 'Brother Oedipus' when, in the course of the argument with his mother, who wants Oedipus to cut down the willow, he asks her if she can turn into a mouse. His mother replies by criticizing his wife. Oedipus replies by remarking: 'Turn into a mouse ... and I will pounce' (p. 19) implicitly referring to 'Puss-in-Boots.' The old Oedipus has not merely been subverted. He has in fact been returned to the spirit of metamorphosis and continuous genesis which is at the core of myth-making.

This is, I take it, precisely the sense of the second story, 'The Black Farm,' the story of Daedalus's transformation from a figure of light to a figure of darkness. He belongs to the Oedipus sequence inasmuch as he is Oedipus's uncle. He is also, as Oedipus's brother discovers, the snake in the garden of Eden, and later, realizing his dream of a black farm, he is depicted as 'Sancho Panza with a kingdom of blackmoors' (p. 35). In a world of analogy all myth, it would appear, issues from the same place. Myth is not, however, for Watson simply metonymical displacement. Her characters are required to undergo metaphorical change as a part of the language system into which they are inserted. Once 'Oedipus' is reduced to 'Puss,' nothing prevents his mother from being a mouse. Furthermore, at the centre of myth opposites converge. Daedalus, who has spent his life as the artificer/entrepreneur, becomes victim of his own urge to control. 'He became,' the narrator declares, 'possessed instead of possessing' (p. 34). The result is that the former great explorer of the air decides to have a black farm which would incorporate 'eternal verities' (p. 34). Such a place, we are told, would permit him to devote himself 'to the discovery of values and the pursuit of truth' (p. 35). Part of the problem is to find 'true black' (p. 35). The next problem is the moral enormity of the task: 'I have set myself to find a natural uniformity, he said, against which my person might shine with the glory of heaven. Nature resists me at every turn' (p. 37). Eventually, in his effort to overcome nature, he is chosen by Ghede, 'the eternal figure in black' (p. 38). Ghede, Oedipus tells us, is a composite figure: 'He is ... death at the cross roads. He stands at the intersection of time and eternity. He is corpse and phallus, king and clown. He introduces men to their own devil. He is the last day of the week and the cross in every cemetery. He sings the song of the grave digger' (p. 39). This is a statement that seems to have all the right oracular properties appropriate to myth. Ghede is an abstraction — death and the meeting of time and eternity — and also representative, as well as symbolic. It would appear that Daedalus has found true blackness. But no utterance is final in Watson. No sooner is it made than Daedalus's consort, Europa, gives

27 Sheila Watson, *Five Stories* (Toronto: The Coach House Press 1984) 10. All further references in the text are from this edition.

reports of drumming in the hills where Daedalus resides protected by his black servants. It is a declaration that strongly echoes Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. But it is an echo that comes close to parody. The drums are not only 'beating.' By the end of the paragraph they are 'chuckling,' and this light laughter is never far from the text. Immediately following, Oedipus receives Daedalus's final words: '*The god of the abyss has spoken. All black is white. There are no eternal verities*' (p. 40). Daedalus is truly *mise en abyme* where *différance* is dissolved. This, at least, appears to be the truth of the abyss, but Oedipus's gloss at once perceives the abyss as a mesh of intertextual differentiation: 'He has cried out to the god, Oedipus said, but the echo of his own voice has drowned the answer' (p. 40).

Clearly it could be argued that if Watson had chosen to tell 'The Black Farm' with the names changed, dropping 'Oedipus' as she thought of dropping 'Coyote,' we might not have seized upon myth as the dominant element. Simply because she has not, we have no choice. We are then led, however, to asserting that her fiction is not designed to dismantle myth by rewriting it. It says, rather, that myth is the fiction of fiction, and that its truth lies in the plurality of its possibilities. In a celebrated remark, Watson once observed 'that what [she] was concerned with was figures in a ground.'²⁸ In these stories myth is her ground. It is neither logos nor authority, but rather another register for the voices of the text to play against. This would accord with her own sense of ground as a kind of landscape where characters are entwined. 'They're interacting with the landscape,' as Watson puts it, 'and the landscape is interacting with them ... not the landscape, the things about them, the other things which exist.'²⁹ The textual function of myth, then, is not simply to foreground a mythic level, but, paradoxically, to break the authoritative ground of myth, thus disseminating meaning. This permits the reader to sense, at least, that she is witness to the scene of originary significance, despite the fact that origin is perceived to be (a) fiction. This perhaps is a function of our myth-making, a process in which our fictions drown the voice of the god.

One consequence is that characters themselves begin to drown in texts, choking in semiotic density. 'Antigone,' for example, begins with the perfectly simple sentence, 'My father ruled a kingdom on the right bank of the river' (p. 43). The indefinite article implies that it is one among several kingdoms; the definite article suggests a central impor-

tance given to the river. 'Right bank' is more of a moral, than a geographical, position; and the whole tone of the sentence carries an oracular note, hinting at powers beyond that of the normal father. The second sentence confirms such a reading by the special use of adjectives and references: 'He ruled it with a firm hand and a stout heart though he was often more troubled than Moses, who was simply trying to bring a stubborn and moody people under God's yoke.' 'Father' has become Lacanian, burdened with the Old Testament, a legendary figure whose kingdom, we later find, is beside the Fraser River, not far from the Delta in Vancouver. He governs not only Oedipus and Antigone, but also 'Atlas who held up the sky, Hermes who went on endless messages, and Helen who'd been hatched from an egg, and Pan the gardener, and Kallisto the bear' (p. 43). We are allowed to know from explicit statements in 'The Rumble Seat' that the father directs a mental hospital, but such information does not unravel the enigma of the characters and their destinies. It only draws mental illness into the general mystery of fate, inasmuch as nothing is bracketed out of the purview of possibility. Nor, as we are also meant to know, is history of sequential importance. In the world of myth, temporality yields to the reality of analogy. Antigone's 'father' has qualities that are reflected in both Creon and Moses, and he functions as network of signs, rather than as a mimetic figure.

Thus the river Antigone desires to cross to bury her dead bird is equally the river Heraklitos saw. No matter how much it is not the same, 'it is the same kind of water,' according to Antigone (p. 45). So her destiny of eternal defiance belongs as much to her as to her namesake. Thus they cross the river, trespassing upon the father's ground to bury the bird. The narrator begins to recall the Apocalypse: 'Between four trumpeting angels,' he remarks, 'at the four corners of the earth a bride stands before the altar in a gown as white as snow' (p. 50). He is, however, corrected by Antigone, who defies not only her father but also one of his texts, observing: 'It's the winds the angels hold, the four winds of the earth. After the just are taken to paradise the winds will destroy the earth. It's a funeral, she says, not a wedding' (p. 50). Both have a slight claim to John's truth, but Antigone's emphasis modifies it the most, for she does indeed possess a bridal connotation in Sophocles that might, with her claims to justice, have put her in analogy with the Bride of Christ. She is caught without reconciliation between texts, and one might even infer that she is an intertextual casualty. Thus, by the very force of analogy, that permits *différance* to collapse, Antigone is not burying her brother displaced as bird, but rather, as she repeatedly says: ' "It's my funeral" ' (p. 51).

²⁸ Watson, 'What I'm Going to Do,' 183.

²⁹ Ibid.

Oedipus's first words in 'The Rumble Seat' are: 'They're like vultures. ... They're like the nuns perched in the choir loft' (p. 57). Whatever he sees, it is their potential to become simile that he remarks upon. They are there to become texts. The situation is an interview that is about to take place between Oedipus and Pierre, who is generally taken to be Pierre Berton. As it gets underway, their efforts to find a mutually satisfying code forces them to speak French, cite Dante and Elizabethan tragedy, as well as the sexual habits of bees, which somehow reminds Oedipus of The Anglican Women's Auxiliary of Qu'Appelle. Suddenly he announces himself as 'Oedipus who knew the famed riddle,' as if he were 'trying out a role' (p. 61). This is a false note for Pierre who urges him to 'demythologize.' For Oedipus, such a gesture is too late. 'For some,' he remarks, 'I have already become a complex, for others a thematic design like the sphere, the cylinder, and the cube' (p. 61). And so Oedipus tells his 'sad story' (p. 57), from its humblest beginnings in the madhouse to 'the first time we met God, kneeling on a slippery dance floor' (p. 64). But the story goes rambling on, fading on a childhood reminiscence of a Sunday sermon about 'the sad story of Adam' and Noah's Flood (p. 68). There is, in effect, no end to Oedipus's story, like Antigone's, because it is not a function of time. It is an enmeshing of several fictions whose demythologization only throws them more deeply into the fiction they would appear to be exposing and thus voiding.

These are the four stories that have had, until recently, a publishing history separate from the fifth, 'And the Four Animals.' It is in many ways distinct. There are no classical allusions, and the dominant figure, the Coyote, is one that reappears in *The Double Hook*. Like the four stories it follows (in the text), however, it is profoundly moved by myth, and the title itself is drawn from 'Revelation,' which it coolly sets about rewriting by folding it back upon itself. The story returns, at its conclusion, to a moment of origin. Thus it might be said to fulfil the fundamental premise of the other stories, that is, that myth, no matter how much its dimension might appear to be altered through analogy, is myth, not because of an inherent, unchanging truth, but because of its ability to make continuous fiction of apparent cause. It exists, to cite Derrida, 'between archeology and eschatology, as *différance* in apocalypse.'³⁰ Wherever that is, beginning and end seem conjoined by the same act that permits us to distinguish them. And what to call this place that for Derrida is hymeneal is difficult: in 'Antigone' it appears both as wedding and funeral.

The same uncertainty dwells at the core of the fifth story, which begins:

The foothills slept. Over their yellow limbs the blue sky crouched. Only a fugitive green suggested life which claimed kinship with both and acknowledged kinship with neither.

Around the curve of the hill, or out of the hill itself, came three black dogs. The watching eye could not record with precision anything but the fact of their presence. (p. 73)

In a few short strokes the reader is brought past the schematic, but perhaps threatening, landscape to three of the dogs, whose genesis is ambiguous, and who are somehow intimately related to a 'watching eye.' The narrative focalization – and this is certainly a moment when the word should be understood literally – is within the eye of the perceiver. But the narrator takes care to suggest that it cannot be certain whether the dogs are simply a function of the beholder: 'The watcher could not have said whether they had come or whether the eye had focused them into being' (p. 73). The point of this remark, however, is deceptive. It is not directed toward the subject, but rather to lead us to the problem of time that the next sentence raises: 'In the place of the hills before and after have no more meaning than the land gives' (p. 73). In this world where things are, as we see, at the edge of being, time is an illusion. An eternal genesis knows only simultaneity. It corresponds, then, with the synchronic world of the Oedipus stories in which classical myth, biblical story, Don Quixote, and Pierre Berton all share the same discursive space. This also seems to suggest that distinctions between objective and subjective are also illusory. Thus the eye may close and the dogs would sink 'back into their proper darkness' (p. 74). The word 'proper,' of course, implies distinction, but is it only the darkness of all darkness whose portion is theirs? For as soon as the eye is opened, 'the dogs stood black against the blue of the iris for the sky was in the sky yet severed from it' (p. 74). As the dogs share in the dark, so the eye shares colour with the sky.

We are perhaps not correct to speak of the eternal genesis of the narration when we recall that the title comes from 'Revelation.' These four animals are meant to refer to the four evangelists that stand on each side of the heavenly throne. As Scobie has indicated, Watson herself was perfectly aware of this when she chose the title for the story. He also argues that the emphasis on eyes in the narrative may also be attributed to these same beasts who possess many eyes in the biblical

version.³¹ But their eyes have been transferred to the perceiver's eye, as if that eye were in the place of the narrator's eye, the scene of narration. Perhaps, however, we ought to question how the word 'scene' is used by asking with Derrida: 'And will we even still call it *mise en scène*," since that origin concerns the eyes [touche aux yeux] (as we shall see), the origin of visibility, the origin of origin, the birth of what, as we say in French, "sees the light of day" [*voit le jour*, is born] when the present leads to presence, presentation, or representation?³² This implies that the scene is the seeing, and nowhere else. Thus the biblical reference would only appear, as Scobie argues, to be background. In one sense this is a valid assertion, and it allows for the fact, as he says, that these stories are 'the signs of myth, the semiotic gestures of mythical narrative reduced to their most basic forms, an analysis or deconstruction of the process of mythical storytelling.'³³ I would question his use of 'deconstruction' here, unless it is simply a synonym of 'analysis,' an exposition of process. For, as I have argued with respect to the other stories, Watson's technique is only deconstructive to the degree that she does not appear to reify a logocentric order. This means that signifying functions are not fixed and that, as a result, the border between archeology and eschatology is blurred. This would also mean that myth at a zero degree of semiotic gesture knows, as Watson observes, no 'before and after.' These dogs, therefore, may be at their end, but the landscape of their ending appears to be in the same primal state of a first day. Furthermore, their being itself seems to occur almost before our eyes, suggesting their beginning and ending are profoundly related. Somehow in the twinkling of an eye the fourth dog suddenly appears, but it is not clear whether he merely appeared then in the watcher's eye or arrived 'earlier' (whenever that would have been) from the watcher's 'own depths' (p. 75).

The climax of the story has the dogs calmly consume each other limb by limb, literally echoing Antigone's metaphorical assertion, 'It's my funeral.' In the end nothing is left but two jaws, and the story concludes with the sentence, 'And taking the two jaws that lay before him he fed tooth to tooth until one tooth remained and this he hid in his own belly' (p. 76). The end returns to an implicit beginning. For if the dogs had indeed been 'whistled up from his own depths' to become part of the watcher's vision, 'belly' is at once a point of departure as

well as a point of closure, Oedipus's womb tomb. In this sense the biblical text is thus part of a semiotic gesture which points the way through itself to a kind of transcendence. It assists in the generating of a new fiction that would illustrate in a certain measure how fictions get started.

Writing of Freud, Derrida argues that 'To say that *différance* is originary is simultaneously to erase the myth of a present origin. Which is why "originary" must be understood as having been *crossed out*, without which *différance* would be derived from an original plenitude. It is a non-origin which is originary.'³⁴ It is within the framework of these remarks that I want to make some concluding observations on Conan and Watson. The crucial phrase I take to be 'crossed out,' for I take it to be evident that both authors claim their authority in the rearrangement of other fictions. Where they appear to pose problems lies in the fact that they are both profoundly concerned with 'an original plenitude,' but their practice is one that continually exposes the fallacies of the logos by creating it as the absence that cannot be filled. Conan's Angéline is reduced to an eternal metonymy, which is its own kind of *différance*. And she shares with Watson's figures a fundamental characteristic: they are all stratified by texts or, as one might say, crossed and re-crossed by texts. As I have argued, Angéline is barred, as Lacan would say, from access to being by a patriarchal negation. The patriarchal is also present in Watson's stories, and this is in her particular use of analogy as a necessary mythical sign or structure. The analogy is a kind of homology which, as both writers use them, issue in the true crossing out of their figures, notably, Angéline, Antigone, the four animals, Daedalus, and even Oedipus, for whom it is too late to be demythologized. They are crossed out by the logos, which is, I submit, tantamount to being barred by the phallic signifier.

It is significant that the crossing out is attributed to the father as logos in every case but the last of Watson's five stories. What else can be supposed but that these writers, both women, had a certain intent, whether known consciously by them or not? They could not, it appears, have reached the originary had they not addressed it as a non-origin, as a tissue of fictions that must be re-woven. Conan cannot be said herself to have done more – and this is already a wonder – than reduce the logos to fictions by crossing it out in the disfigured figure of Angéline. That was, however, enough to have prepared contexts

³¹ Scobie, 283-5

³² Derrida, 'Living On,' 87

³³ Scobie, 285

for a number of dispossessed female figures from Maria Chapdelaine to those of Aquin. For Watson it is evident that the logos of myth from which her mythologies unwind is not a primal beginning but the sign that assists in the making of the fiction a primal scene. Their originary gestures consist primarily, then, in the act of unseating the logos as no one before them had attempted to do, thus inaugurating in their respective literatures the moment of non-origin. This raises, however, a curious question. This implies that the female – and I include Oedipus and Daedalus in this category – is herself a non-origin. Rather than do that, for I would prefer to avoid the binarism of origin vs. non-origin, let us return, rather, to Derrida's happier expression, which would allow us to see both Watson and Conan as originary in the sense of hymeneal, seeing the text as a scene of perpetual folding in, a process by which levels of privilege give way. The folding in, however, is a sacrifice of both victim and victimizer, making of them both partakers of the non-origin in which the originary is finally placed.

University of Alberta

REVIEWS

*HENRIK VAN GORP et al. *Lexicon van literaire Termen: Tweede, herziene en vermeerderde druk*. Groningen and Leuven: Wolters-Noordhoff 1984. Pp. 348. No price.

On peut considérer qu'un glossaire systématique du vocabulaire propre aux études littéraires constitue pour nos étudiants un instrument de travail aussi indispensable qu'une bonne bibliographie générale de la théorie littéraire, un dictionnaire des œuvres et des auteurs ou un manuel des règles philologiques. Il se fait cependant que les bibliographies, choisies ou systématiques et les manuels d'introduction abondent et que les glossaires sont bien rares, au point que dans bien des langues de culture on n'en trouve aucun qui s'efforce de couvrir l'ensemble des terminologies en usage dans nos études littéraires. Il y a à cette carence quelques bonnes raisons. L'une d'entre elles est qu'il n'existe justement pas de vocabulaire *propre* aux études littéraires ou qu'une bonne part de la terminologie ne leur est pas propre: qu'on songe à la diversité cacophonique des traditions critiques contemporaines, venues du formalisme, de l'herméneutique, de la psychanalyse, du matérialisme historique, de divers secteurs de l'anthropologie; qu'on songe aux innombrables emprunts, – avec glissements de sens subreptices – à la linguistique (et à ses multiples traditions), à la logique et aux gnoseologies (je situe ici la *Semiotics* de Peirce), aux sciences sociales et aux diverses philosophies, de l'Antiquité à nos jours. Mais que l'on songe aussi à ce qui est en quelque sorte le 'bien propre' des études littéraires: le vocabulaire de l'ancienne rhétorique, des rhéteurs grecs à Fontanier, avec son inépuisable activité taxinomique, *transiit classificando*. Le grand travail érudit d'Heirich Lausberg *Handbuch der literarischen Rhetorik* (Munich 1960) donne une idée de la complexité d'une synthèse historique systématique en ce domaine. Ou encore le vocabulaire des genres, procédés et formes fixes, des *Kennings* ou *kenningars* des anciens germains au *roman-collage* ou au *ciné-roman*. N'omettons pas la terminologie prosodique et métrique: spondée, trochée, iambe, crétique On en conclura que celui qui voudrait exhaustive-