

Traces of Proust in Michel Tremblay



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SYNOPSIS

At first glance, Marcel Proust's aristocratic spirit and ambiance are entirely dissimilar to the plebeian milieu of the Quebec playwright and prose writer Michel Tremblay, whose poetics involve raising the *joual* slang of the Montreal suburbs to the tones of ancient Greek tragedy, medieval religious drama or/and the social novel. Proust is also largely absent from the cultural references and allusions that sprinkle Tremblay's works, which include Balzac, Zola, Camus, Vian, Sartre and Genet. Yet Marcel Proust seems to underlie Tremblay's first major novelistic project — the hexalogy *Chronique du Plateau Mont-Royal* (1978–1998), which in the form of a family chronicle traces the birth of the future author. In this rewriting of Marcel Proust, albeit in the third person, the future writer in the making — the storyteller of these novels, designated as a 'little boy' or 'the child of the fat woman' — appears merely in the background, as a convergence of the other characters, who initiate and represent the fundamentals of Michel Tremblay's art. My analysis of this specific configuration of characters in the hexalogy will be completed by one of the novels in the *Traversées* cycle, *La Traversée du continent* (2007), the first volume of the *Diaspora des Desrosiers*, in which the journey of the future author's mother Nana represents a discovery and an apprenticeship in art. Implicit references to *La Recherche du temps perdu* can be delineated throughout the text. A characterization of Tremblayan poetics will complete the presentation of the narrative strategy.

KEYWORDS

Marcel Proust; Michel Tremblay; birth of a writer; total art poetics; French novel; Quebec novel.

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Discussing Proustian traces in the work of Quebec playwright and novelist Michel Tremblay (*1942) is a challenging task. Indices are scarce, yet they exist. Witness a study from the early 1980s on intertextuality and the exhaustion of the totality of art in which Michel Tremblay is compared to Henry James, Mallarmé, Cocteau and, of course, Marcel Proust (Gobin — Deshaies 1983, pp. 106–123). Witness the program for the 'Proust retrouvé' day organized by Université Laval on November 13, 2022, at the Palais Montcalm in Quebec City, where Michel Tremblay was the keynote speaker at



a public talk on the French novelist.¹ Nevertheless, if we look for explicit references to French literature in Michel Tremblay's work, we first come across Balzac and *La Duchesse de Langeais*, a personage which the recurring Tremblayan character Uncle Édouard adopts for his role as a homosexual transvestite. In addition to Édouard's role in Tremblay's play *La Duchesse de Langeais* (1968), we find him in *Des nouvelles d'Édouard* (1984, *News from Édouard*, 2000), the fourth volume of *Chroniques du Plateau-Mont-Royal* (*Chronicles of the Plateau Mont-Royal*), where Édouard recounts his short stay in Paris in 1947. While roaming the city in search of the places and characters of Zolian novels, he finds himself unknowingly in the presence of Boris Vian, and he attends a conversation among Simone de Beauvoir, Sartre and Camus about Jean Genet's *Bonnes* (1947, *The Maids*). No trace of Proust in this Parisian milieu.

If we are to understand what could be considered as a profound link between Proust and Tremblay, we must address the theme of the emergence of writing and the birth of the writer. We must do so within the complexity of 'total art,' a space where writing integrates musicality, notably opera and its proximity to tragedy, where drama approaches lyricism and musical movement, and where pictorial beauty matches the detailed descriptions underpinning novelistic narration.

Through the concept of total art, a significant difference can be established between the two authors: the great work that Michel Tremblay is aiming for must emerge from the people, from their unfettered language, the so-called *joual*, as well as from popular, plebeian, and marginal culture. With this approach, Michel Tremblay not only enhances the credibility of his proletarian origins, but he also contributes to the emancipation of Quebec culture from the French culture, a separation that had been underway since the 1940s. This liberating extrication of the (at the time) peripheral from the metropolis represents a theme in a number of Tremblay's works, and this is also the case with the hexalogy *Chroniques du Plateau-Mont-Royal*, which we will focus on here.

Our presentation will address two main points. The first will concern the problem of the emergence of the writer, both as related generally to the Quebec context and more closely to what may be seen as a reference to Marcel in *La Recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*). The second point represents an attempt to uncover intertextual links, particularly in situations where Tremblay's characters are confronted with creative capacities, the representation of reality as well as the conception of art. Formulating some conclusions along these lines will allow us to establish a number of interesting links between the French novelist and the Quebec author.

THE BIRTH OF THE WRITER

One of the characteristics noted by Quebec critics over the years is the recurring theme of writing as it emerges, with the question of the formation of the writer's character at the heart of the plot. Between Arsène Besette's *Le Débutant* (1914) and Marie-Claire Blais's eleven-volume novel series *Les Soifs* (1995–2022, *These Festive Nights*, in translation since 1997), there are countless cases in which the con-

1 <https://www.flsh.ulaval.ca/evenements/proust-retrouve-au-palais-montcalm>



ditioning of writing becomes a feature of the plot and sometimes the driving narrative impetus. The spread of this theme is certainly commensurate with the long tradition of Quebec writing, from the unlucky Balzacian journalist who comes up against the rigidity of Quebec society in *Le Débutant*, to the young anthropoid who invents language and a mythical epic to unite bipeds and quadrupeds into a new tribe in Gérard Bessette's *Anthropoïdes* (1977). The motif is extended in the mental diary kept in Gaëtan Soucy's *La Petite fille qui aimait trop les allumettes* (2000, *The Little Girl Who Was Too Fond of Matches*, 2016), in which the narrator comes to accept and relish in her femininity, hitherto having been masculinized by her father's up-bringing. Despite the significant tonal and other variations among these works, the themes of speech, authority over speech and the status of the author condition all of the narratives.

Transformations in this model were identified and categorized by André Belleau in his seminal work *Le Romancier fictif. Essai sur la représentation de l'écrivain dans le roman québécois* (1980). His chronological categorization of stages — *roman du code*, *roman de la parole*, *roman de l'écriture* — was expanded upon by Veronika Černíková, who in her doctoral thesis *L'écrivain fictif dans l'œuvre de Gérard Bessette* (2015) introduced the notion of the *roman du commentaire*.

So where and how does Michel Tremblay fit into this categorization in relation to Proust and the problem of the emergence of the writer? In the last category, no doubt, that of the novel of commentary in most of his works, but with the difference that commentary on writing (*écriture*) often spills over into commentary on the status of literature itself.

Tremblay's innovatively drawn characters — *écrivants* (writing individuals) who wish to become *écrivains* (writers) — appear in numerous guises in many of his works. In addition to Édouard, already mentioned, and the character of Cousin Marcel, who will be discussed later, we should also allude to Cécile from the *Cahiers* trilogy (*Le Cahier noir*, 2003; *Le Cahier rouge*, 2004; *Le Cahier bleu*, 2005; *The Black Notebook*, 2006; *The Red Notebook*, 2008; *The Blue Notebook*, 2009). Stricken by dwarfism and at odds with her marginalized family, Cécile pursues a career as a barmaid in the avant-garde cafés and transvestite cabarets that flourish during the Montreal Expo 67 exhibition. Her diary represents an apprenticeship in literature, as she moves from personal notes and observation of her surroundings to constructing characters, a narrator and a narrative. At the same time, this is a portrait of Montreal's cultural and literary history during the 1960s, with Michel Tremblay himself among the characters. What's more, the plot of the first volume is built around an actual event, the staging of Euripides' *Trojan Women* (1966) by André Brassard, Michel Tremblay's friend and regular director of his plays, with the novel unfolding in the pattern of Greek tragedy, from *hubris* and *hamartia* to *anagnorisis* and *catharsis*.

This narrative and metanarrative complexity is already contained in Tremblay's first major novelistic project following his dramatic creative period — the six volumes of *Chroniques du Plateau Mont-Royal* (1978–1998).² In the form of a family chron-

2 The pagination of French quotations in this paper refers to the complete edition of Michel Tremblay's six novels in one volume *Chroniques du Plateau-Mont-Royal*. Leméac/Actes Sud, Montréal/Arles, 2000: *La Grosse Femme à côté est enceinte*, pp. 7–186; *Thérèse et*



icle set in the milieu of Montreal's proletarian district, the hexalogy traces the birth of the future writer. In this rewriting of Marcel Proust, albeit in the third person as told by one of the characters, the future writer in the making appears only in the background as a convergence of the other characters who, in turn, will compose elements of Michel Tremblay's art.

Chroniques presents the history of the Plateau-Mont-Royal quarter in a discontinuous and fragmentary way: it begins with the events of 1942, the year of Tremblay's birth, in *La Grosse Femme à côté est enceinte* (1978, *The Fat Woman Next Door is Pregnant*, 1981) and *Thérèse et Pierrette à l'école des Saints-Anges* (1980, *Therese and Pierrette and the Little Hanging Angel*, 1996). The events of 1947 follow in *La Duchesse et le Roturier* (1982, *The Duchess and the Commoner*, 1999) and *Des nouvelles d'Édouard* (1984, *News from Édouard*, 2000). Episodes from 1952 are recounted in *Le Premier Quartier de la lune* (1989, *The First Quarter of the Moon*, 1994), with events from 1963 detailed in *Un objet de beauté* (1997, *A Thing of Beauty*, 1998). As the titles imply, the chronological discontinuity is matched by thematic variations and diverging hierarchies among the characters. While the first two volumes focus primarily on the future writer's entourage — the life of the extended family and the Plateau-Mont-Royal neighbourhood — the two central volumes of the cycle, *La Duchesse et le Roturier* and *Des nouvelles d'Édouard*, take a resolutely cultural approach, notably through the dominant character — the flamboyant Uncle Édouard, as already mentioned. The communitarian approach is complemented by the insights and commentary by the individual characters and the third-person narrator: while *La Duchesse et le Roturier* presents several cultural milieus in Montreal's French-speaking East (theatres, vaudevilles, cafés, cinemas) as well as family culture (concerts, songs, sing-alongs and radio plays listened to at home), *Des nouvelles d'Édouard* recounts a Montreal dandy and transvestite's confrontation with Paris in the form of a diary with, exceptionally in this series, first-person narration. Setting out to become a writer, Édouard comments not only on the cultural gulf separating Quebecois Americanness from European Frenchness, but also on his own inability to transcend the threshold of his playful (*joualisant*) oral milieu, which is centred on immediate performance and reception. Édouard's long epistolary confession is addressed to Nana, the mother of the 'future writer.' Nana is a passionate reader, the very cultural crux of her large family, and on the symbolic level of novelistic and metaliterary construction she represents the nodal point of the paradigm shift between an underdeveloped, peripheral culture and an emancipated, de-peripheralized, autonomous Quebec literature, for example as represented by Gabrielle Roy's novel *Bonheur d'occasion* (1945, *The Tin Flute*, 1947):

[...] *the fat woman turned her attention to the book that she'd talk about for the rest of her life, with passion, that she would compel everyone around her to read [...]. And much later, in exactly ten years' time, just before leaving for a holiday in the Gaspé Peninsula for the first time in her life, she would give it to her youngest son, telling him: 'This was the most important book of my whole life. Read it. Carefully.*

Pierrette à l'école des Saints-Anges, pp. 187–392; *La Duchesse et le Roturier*, pp. 393–600; *Des nouvelles d'Édouard*, pp. 601–779; *Le Premier Quartier de la lune*, pp. 781–961; *Un objet de beauté*, pp. 963–1175.

You're lucky to be reading at fifteen. I had to wait till I was forty-five (Tremblay 1999, p. 165).³

This passage, located (in) right in the middle of the hexalogy cycle, right in the middle of the third volume, is significant for several reasons. Nana ceases to appreciate reading merely as escape as she discovers a new literary discourse that captures the living Quebec reality of working-class neighbourhoods. But above all, her words are an invitation addressed proleptically to her son, who himself will eventually become an author.

Logically, the last two volumes, which thematize the conditioning of the writer's emergence, follow. *Le Premier Quartier de la lune* (*The First Quarter of the Moon*) contrasts Cousin Marcel, a naturally gifted artist in the making whose schizophrenia and milieu stifle his ambitions, with the observant 'little boy' who at the novel's conclusion discovers the principle of transfiguring reality into literature. Finally, *Un objet de beauté* traces the decomposition of the large family on Fabre Street, the death of 'la grosse femme', and above all the psychic breakdown of Marcel, whose descent into madness contrasts with the lucid entry of 'le petit garçon' into literature.

A major distinctive feature of Michel Tremblay's formative novel series is, as we can see, the strategy of indirectly representing the birth of a writer. The 'I' of the future playwright and novelist never appears explicitly, despite the autofictional evidence (Barette 1996). Tremblay inscribes himself in the narrative: his identity shines through the attitude of the third-person auctorial narrator who refers to his novelistic referent only in the third person as 'the little boy', 'the fat woman's child' or, right at the end of the narrative in 1963 when his mother dies, as 'the other one, the one she has wanted so badly, whom she over-protected and who is in the process of ruining his life very quietly, without making waves, buried in his books, his music and his dreams, apologizing because he can't stay any longer, because the smell of hospitals makes him sick to his stomach' (Tremblay 1998, p. 143).⁴ Yet it is this (literal and metaphorical) loser, still at the beginning of his career in 1963, who will ultimately succeed through the very work in which he saves from oblivion the world from which he came, depicting himself through other personages. As Michel Tremblay describes in an interview, he 'was obliged to restore the whole family in his writing, by becoming a writer who invents everything' (Smith 1983, p. 221).⁵

3 '[...] la grosse femme se pencha une dernière fois sur le livre dont elle allait parler tout le reste de sa vie avec passion, qu'elle ferait lire à tout le monde autour d'elle [...] et beaucoup plus tard, dix ans exactement, juste avant de partir en vacances en Gaspésie pour la première fois de sa vie, elle le donnerait à son plus jeune fils en lui disant « Ça a été le livre le plus important de mon existence. Lis-lé. Attentivement. T'as la chance de le connaître à quinze ans. Moé, je l'ai connu à quarante-cinq' (Tremblay 2000, p. 531).

4 '[...] l'autre, celui qu'elle a tant voulu, qu'elle a surprotégé et qui est en train de rater sa vie tout doucement sans faire de vagues, enseveli dans ses livres, sa musique et ses rêves, s'excusant de ne pas pouvoir rester plus longtemps parce que l'odeur des hôpitaux lui donnait la nausée' (Tremblay 2000, p. 1096).

5 'sera donc obligé de restituer toute la famille par écrit, en devenant un écrivain qui invente tout'.



The story of the birth and formation of a great Quebec writer finds justification in a world resurrected by his art.

The configuration of the characters who form the large family on Fabre Street 4060 surrounding the future writer reflects both the sources and outcomes of the Tremblayan conception of literature as well as its thematic aims and poetics. Grandmother Victoire and Uncle Josaphat-le-Violon represent country roots and folklore relocated to a working-class urban environment, while Uncle Édouard introduces the themes of homosexuality and transvestism, linked to theatricality. At the same time, it is Édouard who finally authenticates popular Montreal culture in contrast to both French culture and Quebec elitism, the latter too closely imitating France. Like Uncle Édouard, Cousin Marcel is a failed artist and an alter ego whose attempts in *Un objet de beauté* allow the author to experiment with various types of *catharsis* (by eliciting terror and/or pity) as well as to address issues of originality/imitation and inscription in cultural memory. Marcel's mother, Aunt Albertine, embodies the tragic principle of the existential prison along with the *anagnorisis* of a hopeless life, a recognition shared in various ways by many of Tremblay's characters.

TOTAL ART

The Proust-Tremblay lineage and linkage are undoubtedly difficult to trace and capture. Still, at the very least, we can see analogies between Proust's work and the emergence of the writer as portrayed by the Quebec author. Tremblay's obvious literary allusions to various other novel anthroponyms may be misleading in this quest, as references are made not only to Proust (Marcel, Albertine), but also to Zola (Nana, Thérèse), Gide (Édouard) and Balzac (Duchesse de Langeais).

It is therefore preferable to move beyond the facile allusions to deepen the analysis. Less conspicuous but more significant is the very idea of writing itself, an act which must integrate the principles of other arts, notably music and painting. Michel Tremblay returns to the character of Cousin Marcel in his to-date most recently published novel *Peintre d'aquarelles* (2018, *The Watercolor Painter*), a follow-up of the hexalogy *Chroniques du Plateau-Mont-Royal*. In the conclusion to the volume *Un objet de beauté*, Marcel attempts to murder his mother Albertine and is interned in a psychiatric clinic at the age of twenty-three. In *Peintre d'aquarelles*, he is (now) seventy-six and in a state of rebellion, refusing lenitive medication, recounting in his diary (never written, but imagined in his head) the influence of his newfound *furor poeticus* on his watercolor works. Literature and painting coalesce.

The idea of the synthesis of the arts is thematized in the first volume of the *Traversées* trilogy, *La Traversée du continent* (2007; *Crossing the Continent*, 2011), which features Rhéauna Rathier, alias Nana, the writer's mother. Like Proust's young Marcel, who leaves his mother in the second section 'Noms de pays' (Place-Names) of *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* (*Within a Budding Grove*), recounting his train journey from Paris to Balbec, Rhéauna/Nana leaves her grandparents and two sisters in Maria, Saskatchewan, and crosses Canada alone at the age of eleven to join her mother in Montreal. At each stop along her way — Regina, Winnipeg, Ottawa — she is welcomed by family, with each visit also an apprenticeship in art. Her first lesson in the

form of listening to her great-aunt Regina's piano concert enables her to discover the power of music to transfigure reality. The combined noetic, ontological and ethical effects of art reveal her the essence of being:

A second or two of silence falls over the living room at the end of the piece [...]. When [Rhéauna] looks back at her aunt as if to ask for her an explanation, she realizes that Regina is smiling. You can't say it's a beautiful smile, Regina's face isn't beautiful, but it's a smile that illuminates, irresistibly sincere (Tremblay 2011, p. 94).⁶

The most significant passage, however, concerns the pictorial effect of the gaze. Between Winnipeg and Toronto, the train skirts by Lake Superior at sunset. The situation is similar to that in *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*:

She has pressed both her hands on the glass, stuck her face there. She wishes she could shed her clothes, shed her skin even. She doesn't know what that means, but all at once she feels an irresistible urge to take off her well-behaved, obedient little-girl's outfit — the coat that's too big, the ridiculous hat, the brand-new Nile-green dress, though she thinks it's so pretty, the stocks, the shoes, the white cotton underpants — to be stark naked on the shore of Lake Superior. Then she would remove her skin, which is also a costume, a kind of disguise that hides something more important, herself, that hides herself, she's sure of it. [...] Then the train negotiates a slight turn toward the south en route to Toronto, and the sunset sweeps over everything. The sky turns from calm to fire. She has seen sunsets before. [...] But a double sunset, what a gift! First the sunset itself, magical and sublime, then as well its reflection blurred by the movement of the waves, its colors transformed by the water, the red becoming gold streaked with green, the gold becoming green streaked with red, the clouds looking at each other's belly [...], all mixed together, stirred, overturned, inverted, the top half solemn, impressive, the lower half furious and wild. A silent end of the world, a symphony without music. She wants to stay! There! Here! Now! Wants this moment never to end (Tremblay 2011, pp. 206–207).⁷

6 'Une seconde ou deux de silence tombent sur le salon à la fin du morceau [...]. Rhéauna [...] ramène son regard sur sa tante comme pour demander une explication, elle se rend compte que Régina sourit. On ne peut pas dire que ce soit un beau sourire, le visage de Régina n'est pas un beau visage, mais c'est un sourire illuminé, irrésistible dans sa sincérité' (Tremblay 2007, p. 99).

7 'Elle a posé ses deux mains contre la vitre, y a collé son visage. Elle voudrait se débarrasser de ses vêtements, de sa peau, même. Elle ignore ce que ça peut signifier, mais elle ressent tout à coup cette envie irrésistible d'enlever d'abord son costume de petit fille sage et obéissante — le manteau trop grand pour elle, le chapeau ridicule, la robe vert d'eau toute neuve qu'elle trouve portant si jolie, les bas, les souliers, le caleçon de coton blanc — pour se retrouver toute nue au bord du La Supérieur. Elle retirerait ensuite sa peau qui est aussi un costume, une espèce de déguisement qui cache quelque chose de plus important, elle, qui cache elle, elle en est convaincue. [...] Puis le train négocie un léger virage en direction du sud pour amorcer sa descente vers Toronto, et le coucher du soleil envahit tout. Le ciel passe du calme au feu. Elle en a pourtant vu, des couchers du soleil. [...] Mais un double coucher de soleil, quelle aubaine ! D'abord le coucher du soleil lui-même, magique, sub-



Unlike Tremblay, Proust's Marcel contemplates the sunrise, moving between opposite windows at each turn to recompose fragments of a painting (Proust 1954, p. 655). Rhéuna's reflections, on the other hand, recount the convergence of being and knowing, in other words, one presence in time that constitutes the source of all pleasure and happiness.

The keystone of Tremblay's writing is its musicality. He is also the author of an opera libretto, a song cycle, two musicals, and the lyrics to a dozen or more songs. If his confession is to be believed, music seems to be linked to the intimate, even erotic universe he creates (Tremblay 1992, pp. 167 sqq.). But above all, he sees music as a model for his writing, especially opera, about which he admires the 'intertwined actions, parallel voices' which 'can convey several strong emotions at once' (Boulanger 2001, p. 31),⁸ resulting in an absolute lyrical effect: 'All my plays are very close to opera, opera being for me complete absurdity, the perfect theater' (DuTurbide 1982, p. 2014).⁹

The theatricality of opera is the trigger for the literary vocation of the 'little boy' in *Le Premier quartier de lune*, the penultimate volume of *Chroniques du Plateau-Mont-Royal*. The 'fat woman's child' is ten years old, the same age as Rhéauna in the train quotation above, as he witnesses a domestic crisis of his Aunt Albertine who on the balcony in full view of the neighbours is crying out her anger and existential anguish. The boy's mother is gravely contemplating intervention, exacerbating the drama, which her diffident son would dread. The staging of the street, the posture of the two *prime donne* and the disposition of the spectators reveal to the youth the possibilities entailed in the sublimation of the sordid and the transmutation of banality into high art/enchantment:

The fat woman's child was standing to one side. He didn't want his mother to get involved publicly in one of his aunt's tantrums, and vowed that if she started yelling again, he'd run away... [...].

Albertine looked up, stared at her sister-in-law for several seconds, her expression like that of a religious fanatic unsure of where she is, then turned her head towards the street. Reason seemed restored and she brought her hand to her forehead. She crossed the balcony, walking around the fat woman's rocking chair, leaned against the railing. She stood there perfectly straight, hands flat on the varnished wood, head high — a rare posture for her. And when she opened her mouth, everything became clear.

It began as a barely murmured recitative, to set the stage; it was about life in general and about a personal cage in particular; about ordeals repressed in the hollow of

lime, puis, en plus, son propre reflet brouillé par le mouvement des vagues, ses couleurs transfigurées par l'eau, le rouge devenu or strié de vert, l'or devenu vert bariolé de rouge, les nuages qui se regardent le ventre [...], tout ça mêlé, brassé, culbuté, inversé, la moitié supérieure solennelle, impressionnante, la moitié inférieure furieuse et folle. Une fin du monde silencieuse, une symphonie sans musique. Elle veut rester là ! Ici ! Maintenant ! Que ce moment ne s'achève jamais' (Tremblay 2007, pp. 220–221).

8 'les enchevêtrements des actions, les voix parallèles' ; 'faire passer plusieurs émotions fortes à la fois'.

9 'Toutes mes pièces sont très près de l'opéra, l'opéra étant pour moi l'absurdité complète, le théâtre parfait.'



a bed with a pillow over her head so that the rest of the house wouldn't hear the cries of rage; about lack of privacy, hypocrisies, loves that cannot be expressed and white sauce that congeals on your plate; it was about loneliness in the midst of unending activity, and madness furtively glimpsed when nothing else is left — the solution for everything, the perfect refuge. It was slow and precise and gently modulated, and it broke your heart.

Then came the grand aria.

The set represented a three-storey brown brick house with three superimposed balconies and a staircase that went from the street up to the second floor. On the middle balcony were two women. The confidante was a fat woman in a rocking chair, who merely nodded assent to whatever the other one sang, not daring to interrupt or make a comment; the heroine, the tragic heroine, was a plain little woman in a polka-dot dress who was expressing herself clearly for perhaps the first time in her life. Her song rippled gently without ever rising very high; instead it seemed to descend towards the chorus, six children to whose backs this lament was not really addressed but who just happened to be there when the scene began — , as if such thing as coincidence existed. [...]

As the song unfolded, doors opened along Fabre street. The mothers of other children, older or younger ones, came out on their balconies and they in turn leaned against the railing or the supporting column. They punctuated the heroine's grand aria with onomatopoeia or with snatches of sentences that wrapped themselves around the song and carried it higher. You could hear exclamations of 'Oh yes!' or 'That's for sure!' or 'Isn't it the truth!' or 'You're so right!' that underlined the ingratitude of children, their thoughtlessness and their demands. Their own misfortunes were less flamboyant than those of the little woman on the balcony, but they identified with the one, who dared to speak out even though the heroine didn't know they were there. Their bodies swayed to the melody, some of them humming along with their mouths closed, others letting out little moans that brought them relief. More voice were added, the song finally took flight, and it rose up into the incredibly blue sky.

The aria ended in a whisper, in a long drawn-out note terminating in a sigh, after the tragic singer had insinuated that beneath it all lay smoldering a great love that could never be expressed. She was leaning over the railing, in a position of extreme weakness. She stayed that way, as if she was expecting a tremendous ovation that was long in coming.

The chorus dispersed. Slowly the children walked away to join their mothers. Only the fat woman's child stayed at the foot of the stairs. He dared not even go up to the altar of tragedy.

The confidante rose, bent over the tragic singer and took her by the hand, making her straighten up until finally she came and leaned against her shoulder. The confidante said a single phrase that no one else could hear because it was murmured into ear of the tragic one. They went into the house as if exiting a stage.

The fat woman's child clapped his hands, one against the other, three times (Tremblay 1994, pp. 208–2012).¹⁰

10 'L'enfant de la grosse femme se tenait un peu en retrait. Il ne voulait pas voir sa mère mêlée publiquement à une crise de sa tante et se disait que si celle-ci se remettait à hurler il courrait... [...].



This long quotation was chosen to illustrate the fusion of the pictorial, the dramatic and the musical that characterizes Michel Tremblay's prose, the effect of which is analogous to the syntactic harmony in the style of Proust.

LES DIFFÉRENCES – IN CONCLUSION

Similarities also entail differences. Let's start by noting certain particularities of Tremblay's work. One striking aspect is the tragic dimension of his themes: the metaphorization of the existential cage of its marginal characters, but also their Christ-like, sacrificial vocation, rooted in the Catholic tradition of Quebec (Novotná 2018).

Albertine leva les yeux, dévisagea sa belle-sœur pendant quelques secondes avec une expression d'illuminée qui ne sait plus trop où elle se trouve, puis tourna la tête vers la rue. La raison sembla lui revenir et elle porta sa main à son front. Elle traversa le balcon en contournant la chaise berçante de la grosse femme et vint s'appuyer au garde-fou. Elle se tenait toute droite, les mains bien à plat sur le bois verni, la tête haute, ce qui était rare chez elle. Et quand elle ouvrit la bouche tout était redevenu clair.

Ce fut d'abord un récitatif à peine murmuré, une préparation à quelque chose d'important, une mise en situation; il était question de la vie en général et d'une cage personnelle en particulier; il était question de malheurs refoulés dans le creux d'un lit avec un oreiller sur la tête pour que le reste de la maison n'entende pas les cris de rage; il était question de promiscuité, d'hypocrisies, d'amours qui n'arrivent pas à s'exprimer et de saucis blanches qui figent dans l'assiette; il était question de solitude au milieu d'un va-et-vient incessant et de folie aperçue furtivement quand il ne reste plus rien d'autre, la solution à tout, le parfait refuge. C'était lent, précis, doucement modulé et ça crevait le cœur.

Puis vint le grand air.

La scène représentait une maison de briques brunes de trois étages avec trois balcons superposés et un escalier qui menait du trottoir au premier. Sur le balcon du milieu se tenaient deux femmes. La confidente était une grosse femme, assise dans une chaise berçante, qui se contentait d'acquiescer à tout ce que l'autre chantait sans oser l'interrompre ou la commenter: l'héroïne, la tragique, était une petite femme toute simple dans une robe à pois qui s'exprimait peut-être clairement pour la première fois de sa vie. Son chant ondulait doucement sans vraiment monter très haut; il semblait plutôt descendre vers le chœur, six enfants de dos à qui cette plainte ne s'adressait pas vraiment mais qui s'adonnaient à passer par là quand la scène avait commencé, comme si l'adon existait. [...]

Au fur et à mesure que se déroulait le chant, des portes s'ouvrirent sur la rue Fabre. Les mères des enfants, d'autres, plus vieilles ou plus jeunes, sortirent sur leurs balcons, s'appuyèrent à leur tour au garde-fou ou à la colonne de soutien. Elles ponctuèrent le grand air de l'héroïne d'onomatopées ou de bribes de phrases qui s'enroulaient autour du chant pour le porter plus haut. On entendait des — Ah oui !., des Certain !, des C'est donc vrai..., des Vous avez ben raison... qui soulignaient l'ingratitude des enfants, leur inconscience, leurs exigences. Leurs malheurs étaient moins flamboyants que celui de la petite femme sur le balcon, mais elles s'identifiaient à elle qui osait prendre la parole même si l'héroïne n'avait pas conscience de leur présence. Elles suivaient l'air avec leur corps, se balançant, certaines chantaient bouche fermée, d'autres poussaient de petites plaintes qui leur faisaient du bien. Les voix s'ajoutant aux voix, le chant finit par prendre son envol et monter tout droit dans le ciel d'un invraisemblable bleu.



Another difference relates to the context and very institution of literature itself. Whereas Marcel Proust represents a constituted, centuries-old literature, the axiology of which — from the medieval *courtoisie* period onwards — is determined by the aristocratic pole of its references, Michel Tremblay is an author in an emerging literature, one barely two hundred years old and still seeking out its differential foundations, including (and), above all, those in opposition to French culture. Tremblay's narrative aligns with the de-peripheralization of Quebec culture, a process which began in earnest in the 1940s and continued on a wave of decolonization theories during the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s. *Chroniques du Plateau-Mont-Royal* is not only the story of one writer's birth, but also a metaliterary discourse on the domiciliation and empowerment of Quebec literature. The configuration of the characters is representative of the cultural resources from which the work draws, or at least should draw from, according to Tremblay. Despite their similarities to Tremblay's biographical details, the large family on Fabre Street 4060 is fictional (Barette 1996), although the family and its working-class neighbourhood are representative of the communitarian characteristics of Quebec culture in the given time periods. Note that the French cultural references in *Chroniques* do not go beyond the 1940s, and that they are all phagocytized, reappropriated and contextualized within popular North American culture, in the cinema, music hall and chanson in their Québécoized versions. In short, *Chroniques* can be seen as an anti-Proust in which the French novelist emerges as the paragon of consummate literariness from which Quebec literature separates, underlining the popular, democratic inspiration of the latter, which can also be elevated to the sublimity of supreme art.

It is certainly an important distinguishing characteristic that the hexalogy stops at the beginning of the 1960s. By looking back thirty years, the novels constitute a kind of balance sheet of a bygone era. At the time of writing and publication of the six volumes, Quebec literature was undergoing a rapid evolution: the feminist wave, the absorption of dozens of migrant authors, the arrival on the scene of Amerindian authors and the 'ensauvagement' (Voldřichová Beránková 2021, pp. 52–57) of the literary landscape, all of which denationalized and profoundly transformed the canon of Quebec literature. From this point of view, *Chroniques* would itself represent the

L'air s'acheva sur le souffle, dans une longue note filée qui se termina dans un soup-ir, après que la tragique eut insinué que sous tout ça couvait un grand amour qui jamais n'arriverait à s'exprimer. Elle était penchée par-dessus le garde-fou, dans une position d'extrême faiblesse. Elle ne se redressa pas comme si elle avait attendu une énorme ovation qui tardait à venir.

Le chœur se défit. Les enfants s'éloignèrent lentement pour aller rejoindre leurs mères. Seul l'enfant de la grosse femme resta au pied de l'escalier. Il n'osait pas encore monter à l'autel de la tragédie.

La confidente se leva, se pencha sur la tragique qu'elle prit par la main, qu'elle obligea à se redresser et qui finit par s'appuyer contre son épaule. La confidente eut une seule phrase que personne n'entendit parce qu'elle fut murmurée à l'oreille de la tragique. Elles entrèrent dans la maison comme on sort de scène.

L'enfant de la grosse femme frappa ses mains l'une contre l'autre trois fois' (Tremblay 2000, pp. 940–942).



resurrection of a lost time in the form of a return to the foundations of Quebec's modernity. The shadow of Marcel Proust remains a reminder of the origins of the period as well as how the norms of France were transcended.

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