

Antonine Maillet: A Writer's Itinerary

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Royal Navy. The Directorate hopes to do all of this in one book. If the story of Canada's naval war is to be properly told it will have to be a very fat volume.

MARC MILNER

Antonine Maillet: A Writer's Itinerary

MORE THAN A DECADE has now passed since Antonine Maillet, the native of Bouctouche, New Brunswick, stunned audiences and readers alike with her brilliant text, *La Sagouine*,¹ a series of dramatic monologues centered on a long-suffering but lucid and courageous Acadian washerwoman, "qui est née avec le siècle, quasiment les pieds dans l'eau". This one-woman show, unforgettably acted by Viola Léger, was seen by thousands of people throughout Canada and the New England states, as well as in France, Belgium and Switzerland. The book containing the 16 monologues has sold some 100,000 copies. Maillet's literary career was crowned in 1979, when she won France's leading literary prize, the Prix Goncourt, for her novel, *Pélagie-la-Charrette*, the first Canadian writer to do so. Some one million copies of the original edition of *Pélagie* have been sold.

Although Antonine Maillet first came into prominence when *La Sagouine* was staged and printed in 1971, her writing career goes back some 25 years and rests on solid foundations. Born on 10 May 1929 to parents who were both school teachers, she was one of nine children.² Her father abandoned his teaching career and later became manager of the Irving general store in Bouctouche, an establishment evoked movingly by *la Sagouine* in the monologue, "Nouël", as she looks longingly at the fruits and chocolates displayed in the store window at the approach of Christmas. Maillet attended elementary school in her native town, then went to the Académie Notre-Dame du Sacré-Coeur in Memramcook and then to the Collège Notre-Dame d'Acadie in Moncton where she obtained her B.A. and M.A. She studied at the Université de Montréal and at Université Laval where she was granted, respectively, a *Licence ès lettres* and a doctorate, the latter for her study, *Rabelais et les traditions populaires en Acadie*.³ For a time she was a nun, her religious name being Soeur Marie-

1 (Montréal, Leméac, 1971). A second edition, containing interesting articles on the language and significance of the text, was issued in 1973 by the same publisher. Subsequent page references are to this latter edition. An English translation, bearing the original title, was published by Simon and Pierre, Toronto, 1979.

2 Biographical details have been culled from the *Dictionnaire des oeuvres littéraires du Québec*, III (Montréal, Fides, 1982), Laurent Lavoie's "Chronologie" in *La Revue de l'Université de Moncton*, VII, 2 (mars, 1974), and Dane Lanken, "L'Acadienne", in *Quest* (December, 1982).

3 (Québec, Presses de l'université Laval, 1971).

Grégoire. Maillet followed her parents' tradition of teaching, first in an elementary school at Richibouctou Village, then at the College Notre-Dame d'Acadie and the Université de Moncton.

Her writing career commenced seriously in 1957, with the performance of her play "Entr'acte", and the following year "Poire-àcre" won first prize for the best Canadian play at the Dominion Drama Festival. Also in 1958, she published her first prose work, *Pointe-aux-coques*,⁴ a chronicle narrated by a Mlle Cormier (Maillet's mother's name) about a year she spent in a New Brunswick fishing village. This book, which first saw her use elements of the Acadian dialect, won the Prix Champlain. Shortly after, she left her religious order. Maillet pursued her stage writing with *Les Crasseux*,⁵ written in 1966 and published two years later. In this play, there emerges the binary division between "les gens d'en haut" and "les gens d'en bas", a structure at one and the same time physical, social and cultural, which marks many of her writings. Here, too, some of her memorable characters are named for the first time — la Sagouine, Don l'Original, etc. — though there is little Acadian dialect in this play. Following the vast success of *La Sagouine*, Maillet gave up her teaching career definitively in 1975. She had already won the Governor General's Award in 1972 for *Don l'Original*⁶ and went on to receive the Grand Prix de la Ville de Montréal for her novel *Mariaagêlas* and the Prix des Volcans, a French honour, for the same work. Her Acadian "Nativity" novel, *Emmanuel à Joseph a Dâvit*, earned her the Prix France-Canada (1975), while her first long fiction work, *Les Cordes-de-Bois* was on the short-list for the Goncourt in 1977, and won the Prix des quatre jurys in France.

One of the most compelling themes in Antonine Maillet's writing is the *constante* of a clear "parti pris pour les pauvres".⁷ Although she herself did not come from the social class of la Sagouine, and while neither a social scientist nor a historian, Maillet clearly shaped a number of her major works from the viewpoint of what Pierre Trépanier has recently called "le petit peuple et ses représentations du monde".⁸ While she shares with "l'école néo-nationaliste" a concern about "la domination économique (et) l'oppression nationale", she is also highly conscious of social diversification *within* Acadian society. She herself has described thus the social ambience in which she grew up: "ce bonheur tout simple des humbles gens qui appartiennent ni à la classe des trop chanceux,

4 (Montréal, Fides, 1958). A second edition was published by Leméac in 1972. Our references are to the latter.

5 (Montreal, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968).

6 (Montréal, Leméac, 1972). An English translation, entitled *The Tale of Don l'Original*, was published by Clarke, Irwin, Toronto, 1978.

7 Simone LeBlanc-Rainville, "Entretien", *La Revue de l'Université de Moncton*, VII, 2 (mars, 1974), p. 20.

8 "Clio en Acadie", *Acadiensis*, XI (Printemps 1982), p. 102.

ni à celle des réprouvés, ce qui leur donne le droit de rêver à ce qui leur manque et de profiter de ce qu'ils ont".⁹ In reply to a question about her "parti pris pour les pauvres", Maillet replied: "C'est une question à la fois esthétique et humaine. J'ai fait un choix pour ces-gens-là. . . partout dans le monde ces gens-là m'attirent".¹⁰

In her first prose work, *Pointe-aux-Coques*, this "parti pris" is already evident, albeit in a rudimentary fashion. The army of unemployed of the Depression is evoked at the very beginning of that book. And a central, though insufficiently aestheticized strand, is that of the need to form a fishermen's cooperative to fight the monopolies in the canning industry. Says Jean: "Je suis dans le nord, à étudier les mouvements co-opératifs. . . Je travaille dans des coopératives de pêche. Vous savez, si le village veut continuer la pêche, il faut s'organiser" (p. 79). But this dream will be difficult to fulfill, partly because of an accident, and partly because of the passivity and defeatism of most of the fishermen: "puis je voyais courir entre ces barbes et ces peaux tannées, les noms de préjugé, d'ignorance, de traditions qui formaient un bloc invulnérable. Et pour s'opposer à cette force négative, une dizaine de bonnes volontés, trois ou quatre esprits éclairés et Jean, le traceur de routes" (p. 150). In this first prose work there is also a sizeable ethnological component, which is not fully integrated into the imaginary universe, something we find recurring in the works of Maillet.

In *La Sagouine*, on the other hand, Antonine Maillet succeeded in shaping a text that deftly combines a highly sensitive social consciousness with an appropriate aesthetic form, thus creating a work that stands as one of the outstanding achievements of Canadian francophone literature in the decades following the Second World War. The publication of *La Sagouine* was, according to Simone LeBlanc-Rainville, "un événement d'une grande portée sociale en Acadie. Pour la première fois peut-être, l'élite ne parle pas au nom du peuple, mais laisse les plus défavorisés parler pour tous". The same writer also pointed to the shock created by this text and by its stage setting among the Acadian establishment in the early 1970s, for many a one chose not to recognize "l'existence d'une catégorie de personnes dont la misère est un reproche à sa bonne conscience".¹¹ An example of a conservative "reading" of *La Sagouine* is that of Bruno Drolet's *Entre dune et aboiteaux. . . un peuple; étude critique des oeuvres d'Antonine Maillet*.¹² Drolet seemed to be stung by the weight of the social criticism of Maillet's text: "Partant d'injustices sociales sans doute réelles pour une part (bien que le tableau semble chargée. . .) *La Sagouine* s'efforcera de démon-

9 "Antonine Maillet. Présentation d'André Major", in *Ecrits du Canada français*, 36 (1973), p. 13.

10 LeBlanc-Rainville, "Entretien", p. 23.

11 "Note sur *La Sagouine* et nous", *La Revue de l'Université de Moncton*, VII, 2 (mars, 1974), p. 36-37.

12 (Montréal, Les Editions Pleins Bords, 1975).

trer que les cadres de la société dite libérale font [sic] les riches plus riches et les pauvres plus pauvres" (p. 54, my emphasis). An implicit debate also developed around the question of the charwoman's resignation and fatalism in their relative relationship to her radical questioning of the economic, political and religious foundations of the existing social order. Simone LeBlanc-Rainville has written meaningfully on this question: "Son côté le plus typiquement acadien est peut-être sa fausse résignation. On a toujours parlé de la soumission des Acadiens sans jamais comprendre ce qui se cache derrière cette docilité apparente. . . Il faut être bien naïf pour ne pas voir dans ses propos l'expression de la révolte contenue des Acadiens".¹³ And Raymond LeBlanc says of la Sagouine: "Elle n'est certes pas le personnage révolutionnaire; le moment n'est pas encore venu. Mais. . . elle dit ce que c'est que d'être esclave d'un système d'exploitation inhumain. Elle annonce le réveil d'un peuple bafoué. Un nouveau réel. Contre la mort".¹⁴

Mariaagélas (Montréal, Leméac, 1973) presents what Maillet has called "la contre partie de la Sagouine" in the person of the rebellious young smuggler of the title who constantly and totally contests her environment. In this, one of Maillet's best prose works, the narrative abounds with humorous incidents and poetic passages, as well as social commentary. The heroine, descendant of a family of fishermen-blacksmiths-cum-bootleggers, turns to the latter occupation as do many of her compatriots, because of their poverty and alienation at the hands of both the elites and the distant and anonymous governments which made and enforced laws without consulting those most affected by them. Ostracized in her village after she struck a teacher who had humiliated her younger sister, Mariaagélas could no longer work as a maid: "Plus aucune maison respectable n'engagerait servante une fille qui avait fait saigner le nez de la maîtresse" (p. 14). She had earlier ruled out the usual avenue to which girls "du sud du pont" would turn at 14: the lobster canning plants. This defiant decision was influenced by the experience of her aunt, Claraagélas, who would tell her about the muddy floors, water-filled boots, 12-hour shifts, chilled hands and smell of rotten fish. When Tante Clara tried to organize the cannery workers and was persecuted for this, she had her revenge by dropping a cigarette butt on some oil in the shop before fleeing. The law, however, caught up with her, and years in jail followed. When the aunt returns home, she and Mariaagélas are reunited. The sworn enemy of Mariaagélas, "la veuve à Calixte", the

13 "Note sur *La Sagouine* et nous", p. 36.

14 "Lire Antonine Maillet de *Pointe-aux-Coches* à *La Sagouine*", *Revue de l'Université de Moncton*, VII, 2 (mars, 1974), p. 57. For a detailed discussion on the alleged overriding defeatism of la Sagouine see my article, "Thèmes et structures de la contestation dans *La Sagouine* d'Antonine Maillet", *Voix et images*, 1, 2 (décembre, 1975), pp. 206-219.

15 Videotaped interview with Laurent Mailhot, "Visages des lettres canadiennes-françaises", University of Toronto, April, 1973.

satirized *dévoté* (a recurring type in Maillet's fiction and drama), also becomes Claraagélas's adversary when the aunt returns home. A massive police raid on the homes and cellars of the fishermen takes place while they celebrate Acadia's national holiday, Assumption Day, and following the unsolved murder of Ferdinand, the fisherman turned customs-officer, the two women, aunt and niece, disappear from the village never to return, followed by many a legend. The lesson drawn by the fisherman, Basile à Pierre, from these events of "la plus glorieuse et la plus tragique époque de l'histoire de mon pays" (p. 236), in the words of the narrator, was that the divisions among the poor folk themselves were responsible for Ferdinand's death: "parce que le nord et le sud se mangeaient les uns les autres; parce qu'au moindre vent contraire, on se sautait sur l'échine au lieu de s'unir pour faire face à l'adversité et se sortir ensemble de la misère" (p. 226). Thus, the clumsy social comment of Maillet's first prose work, *Pointe-aux-Coques*, is here shaped into a much more aestheticized, and therefore more meaningful, form.

The violent acts of the maritime folk in *Mariaagélas*, when faced with threats to their livelihood during the prohibition era, have their counterparts in *Emmanuel à Joseph à Davit* (Montréal, Leméac, 1975). Here, the forced evacuation from coastal villages to urban industrial centres leads to the setting on fire of a wharf and a boycott of lobster fishing.¹⁶ This work is moulded in the traditional Nativity structure. As a comet lights the December sky, the boat-builder, Joseph, and his pregnant wife, Mârie, hitch-hike south to Moncton to see the "Governor" to protest the expulsions from the coastal villages. All they get is a reprimand and a lesson on the inevitability of factory-produced boat-construction. Meanwhile, a three-man royal commission, (the Wise Men!) including one priest, is wending its way through the countryside, preoccupied by a vital question: "Comment traiter l'injustice et la pauvreté" (p. 35). The investigators come upon an abandoned fishing cabin soon after Mârie gives birth to Emmanuel. The poor folk who give them shelter somehow find a little money to help the couple return northwards, showing a generosity which contrasts strongly with the hypocritical niggardliness of the elites so deftly denounced in *La Sagouine*. Throughout this short novel, the theme of hope, of reshaping the world, is manifest. And the work ends with the words of the prophetess, Anne, who, in words reminiscent of the magnificent monologue "Le Printemps" in *La Sagouine*, hails the return of the seagulls in the spring: "Et le printemps qui vient, ben, c'en sera un vrai, c'ti-citte, coume si i' fut le premier que j'arions jamais vu. . . La mer ara des poissons, et la terre des racines, et le firmament des étouèles. Et pis un jour, les houmes pourront parler aux ours et aux chats-cerviers sans qu'i' les griffiont ni les dévorions. Et c'te jour-la, les houmes se parleront entre zeux, itou, et Dieu les écouterà. . . par rapport qu'à l'avenir, y ara

16 Cf. Jean-Claude Labrecque's film, *Les Smattes* (1971), on similar violence in the Gaspé region in the 1960s.

tchequ'un pour parler pour zeux. Et c'ti-la... ben il a passé par chus nous..." (p. 142). Yet in spite of the fine satire, allegorical framework, and transposition of the dream of Isaiah, *Emmanuel à Joseph à Dâvit* lacks sufficient cohesion and economy to make it one of Maillet's most memorable works.

With *Les Cordes-de-Bois* (Montréal, Leméac, 1979) Antonine Maillet began to write more expansive works which aimed more consciously than the previous ones at creating an Acadian "Genesis". Thus, at the very beginning of the book we are told: "Nous sommes tous, au pays, à deux doigts d'un mercenaire, d'un pirate, d'un matelot étranger échoué sur nos côtes..." (p. 11). While Maillet is concerned with establishing a distinct identity for the Acadians, and evoking pride, she seeks, at the same time, to demythify her people's origins and bring the latter down to earth, thus differentiating herself from the traditional historiography of the elites.

As in other works, there is a binary structure here, setting in opposition two topographico-cultural loci, and their representative figures. The traditionally puritanical Ma-Tante-la-Veuve, who is the image of the stagnant, murky "barachois" that line her property, is pitted against la Piroune and her single, strangely-named daughter, la Bessoune (the Twin), who live squatter-like on the windswept hillock known as "les Cordes-de-Bois". During the Depression, "les Cordes-de-Bois" becomes a haven for all kinds of vagabonds, who ate out of trash cans, in addition to its "regulars", la Piroune and la Bessoune, whose family name was Mercenaire! The latter are also pitted against Ma-Tante-la-Veuve during the tobacco harvest in the August heat, when they worked seven days a week for the prude, who receives special dispensation from the priest for Sunday work, alleging the danger of storm damage to her crop. The author also contrasts the open accosting of sailors by la Bessoune and other young women of the Cordes-de-Bois with the more "circumspect" behaviour of their social rivals: "Vous n'auriez pas vu à cette époque des gens respectables s'enrichir dans des commerces douteux et défendus. Vous ne les auriez pas vus, non... Parce que si on est respectable, on sait camoufler ces choses-là. Seuls les Cordes-de-Bois ne camouflaient rien" (p. 217). The established social order is shaken when, during the reverse auction of the extremely poor and debilitated on the church steps, the folk of the Cordes-des-Bois, having the least to "offer", end up with a goodly number of the outcasts, for whom the church coffers were being emptied: "Scandaleux! et inacceptable! On ne pouvait pas laisser faire ça. Si les méchants se mettaient à faire les bons..." (p. 309). During this degrading ceremony the young assistant priest overrides the authority of the *curé* and puts an end to the slave auction, demanding that the down-and-outs alone choose those for whom they would like to work... thus hastening his departure for Rome. Once again, then, Maillet made ample use of her social perceptions and literary imagination, though in *Les Cordes-de-Bois* economy is not a principal virtue and much padding and repetition get in the way of aesthetic balance.

The equally long *Pélagie-la-Charrette* (Montréal, Leméac, 1979) is a far more successful creation, and the most vital part of the Acadian "Genesis".¹⁷ Maillet's *Pélagie* is linked to a capital moment of her people's history, the expulsion in 1755 of the Acadians from Nova Scotia, and their scattering throughout the southern colonies of the Atlantic seaboard. This traumatic reference point is variably (and sometimes euphemistically) called in the novel, and elsewhere in her work, "La Déportation", "Le Grand Dérangement", "L'Événement", "La Grande Echouerie", "La Dispersion". *Pélagie-la-Charrette* is not without weaknesses, sometimes suffering from *rembourrage*, occasionally turning melodramatic. Nevertheless, together with *La Sagouine* and *Mariaagélas*, it is the foundation of a corpus which has left a distinct mark on the francophone literature of Canada and beyond.

Pélagie is indelibly marked by the rhythm of continuity, and its final inscription reads: "Boucoute, le 23 juin, 1979, en cette année du 375^e anniversaire d'Acadie". The very title, named after the heroine who leads a ragamuffin band of remnants of her people back to Acadia during a 10-year trek on foot and in carts of all sizes and shapes, also underlines the dominant theme of continuity: "C'était coutume en Acadie d'apporter en dot une charrette à son homme, la charrette signe de pérennité" (pp. 299-300). The narrative structure, based on a lineage of chroniclers retelling the saga at a distance of 100 years (at the end of the 19th century and today, at the end of the 20th) is also one of continuity. The unobtrusive primary narrator in the present relates most of the events of the epic return of the Acadians between 1770 and 1780 as they are told to her by her cousin, "le vieux Louis à Bélonie, dit le jeune", who himself had them passed down from his grandfather, Bélonie, a storyteller of the end of the previous century, who used to argue the fine points of the heroic feat with Pélagie-la-Gribouille (the Simpleton), both of the latter descendants, respectively, of the nonagenarian Bélonie and the original Pélagie, who actually lived the adventure of the arduous homecoming. Other rhythmic devices give cohesion and unity to the novel, and fuse its form and content into a whole. One of the most important of these is the *dédoublement* between the oxen-led *charrette* of Pélagie, that of life, hope and optimism, and the ghostly *charrette de la mort*, that of destruction, despair and fatalism, with its six black horses constantly evoked and perceived by the wizened Bélonie as travelling alongside, and sometimes in the very ruts of, Pélagie's vehicle. The two *charrettes* "compete" mercilessly throughout the narrative. Old Man Bélonie, too, is the source of other elements of fantasy, as he recounts legends and folk tales.

The story is structured, too, by the refrain of the traditional Acadian folksong, "Le Grain de Mil", sung on the few happy occasions that break the suffer-

17 A translation (Toronto, Doubleday, 1982) has also appeared. For a more detailed discussion of *Pélagie*, see my "Antonine Maillet and the Prix Goncourt", *The Canadian Modern Language Review*, XXXVI, 3 (March, 1980), pp. 392-396.

ing of the exiles, and by that other refrain-expletive, "merde au roi d'Angleterre", evoked when the burning of the church at Grand-Pré or other tribulations at the hands of British are recalled. There is also frequent repetition, with variation, of the phrase, "N'éveillez pas l'ours qui dort. . .". This allusion to the Loyalist majority of New Brunswick echoes Maillet's oft-repeated reference to the passive resistance of the Acadians to discrimination and inequality and the importance of patience and subterfuge in their struggles to redress ancient ills. While the British troops of the 1755 events and their aftermath are often the butt of Maillet's irony and bitterness, the rancour of the past gives way to forgiveness, in the hope of starting life anew on Acadian soil: "le printemps qu'on lui avait volé, à la Pélagie, vingt-cinq ans auparavant, l'attendait sur les rives de la baie Française. Plus rien que ces cent lieues et elle oublierait, et elle pardonnerait, et elle bâtirait son logis incendié" (p. 331).

The language of *Pélagie* is largely that of the spoken word. Maillet has given it a more stylized form than she did in *La Sagouine*, to which she appended a glossary, still keeping its essential flavour while making her book more accessible to the average reader. The texture of the language is often richly poetic, as in the most successful of her works, and towards the end of the novel, the lyricism inundates the prose, in the springtime of the return to Acadia in 1780. This is especially so during Pélagie's pilgrimage to the desolate Grand-Pré of her childhood and youth (pp. 340-341). The language is often humorous, earthy, Rabelaisian, *démesuré*. And its Acadian flavour is kept intact. In fact, Antonine Maillet, when speaking of the significance of her Prix Goncourt, stressed the esteem it had given the popular speech of her people, which was brought to North America by the *colons* of Poitou and Touraine in the 17th and 18th centuries: "il y a plus important encore: le Goncourt est une reconnaissance universelle. Et c'est un statut qu'on donne à notre langue. . . Depuis le temps qu'on nous disait: 'Vous parlez patois. . . ou le dialecte acadien. . .' Il me semble qu'on ne peut plus maintenant entendre ces phrases! Le jour où une académie donne un prix de cette envergure à une oeuvre, c'est qu'elle reconnaît le statut de cette langue aussi".¹⁸

After *Pélagie*, *Cent ans dans les bois* (Montréal, Leméac, 1981) is a disappointment. A sequel to *Pélagie*, it sets out to pursue the Acadian epic from 1780 to 1880. While the work has attractive elements — the profusion of proverbs as an integral part of the habitual oral style, the symbolism of the tree, the play on the opposition between nature and culture, personification of natural elements — it finally fails because its contrived and unusually thin plot is unable to sustain a 350-page novel. The quest for the LeBlanc treasure-chest lacks verisimilitude, as does the insistence of la Gribouille that her daughter Babée marry the hunchback artisan, Léon, instead of her betrothed Pierre. (Indeed, the exploitation of the hunchback theme recalls some of the worst features of traditional

18 *Le Devoir*, 1 décembre 1979, p. 29.

fairy tales). Folklorization, didacticism, and ethnologism far outweigh the richly imaginative and the sudden artificial leap into the Acadian national convention at Memramcook, in 1881, replete with notes documenting the official speeches, is perhaps the worst example of faulty aestheticization of historical events in all of Maillet's work.

Reflecting on the publication of *Cent ans dans les bois*, one cannot help but worry with Yves Leduc that Maillet has become a victim of a situation in which "le marketing règne en maître".¹⁹ Leduc points to the manipulative, falsely interrogative "question" placed on the back cover of *Pélagie*: "La plus grande odyssée des temps modernes?", and rightly asks, after admitting the popularity of Maillet's fiction: "N'y aurait-il pas moyen d'aimer avec discernement, sans mêler le bon et le moins bon, sans mettre sur le même pied le chef-d'oeuvre, le roman moyen, le roman à dix cents?" Gilles Marcotte has also indirectly given food for thought on the Maillet "phenomenon": "Or ce qui fait vendre les littératures nouvelles sur le marché international, c'est l'exotisme". And he adds ironically: "La solitude de l'écrivain est une fiction. . .C'est l'institution qui lui dit d'écrire, et même — dans une certaine mesure, que je ne tenterai pas de déterminer — comment écrire". Also: "Il est permis de dire. . .que beaucoup d'ouvrages littéraires publiés au Québec ne le sont pas en vertu de leurs qualités propres ou parce qu'ils peuvent se vendre, mais pour nourrir un appareil d'édition proliférant. . .".²⁰ Having rescued the language of the Acadian people from the condescension of the establishment, it would be ironic if she were to succumb to the temptations of a publishing industry constantly in search of marketable literary commodities.

Yet it also seems that critics have wrongly anathematized some of Maillet's best work. When René Lapierre says in lapidary fashion of *Pélagie*: "pas même une oeuvre",²¹ and when Victor-Lévy Beaulieu fulminates against Antonine Maillet in a global fashion, mocking her use of the Acadian dialect,²² they seem to be imposing *their* concept of what a novel should be on all writers. Antonine Maillet has shown in *La Sagouine*, *Mariaagêlas* and *Pélagie* that she has a profound love of the ordinary folk of Acadia which she is capable of transforming into rich literary creativity. The best works of Antonine Maillet present a remarkable and original portrait of the Acadian people, and her longstanding "parti pris pour les pauvres", like her composition of an epic Acadian "Genesis", have had a significant influence on our understanding of her people's culture and history. Whether she will build on these solid foundations or continue to slump into the role of producer of exchangeable commodities remains to be seen.

BEN-Z. SHEK

19 Review of *Pélagie-la-Charrette* in *Si que* (Printemps, 1982), pp. 152-3. See also René Lapierre, "Littérature acadienne. Ancêtres, charrettes et charriage", *Liberté*, 127 (janvier-février, 1980), pp. 91-94. One is also disturbed by a full page ad in *Le Devoir*, 28 novembre 1981, carrying the

title, "Chez Leméac, toute l'oeuvre d'Antonine Maillet", with no fewer than three reproductions of the cover of *Cents ans*, plus those of all of Maillet's books thrown together helter skelter (including her less than successful stage adaptations of prose works, and her very elementary story collection, *Par derrière chez mon père*).

- 20 "Institution et courants d'air", *Liberté*, 134 (mars-avril, 1981), pp. 5-14. These remarks could easily be applied to a number of Maillet's works, which have become so many items of exchange value. Many of the less-than-successful stage productions of her works, too, fall into this category. The recent staging of *La Joyeuse Criée*, another one-woman show featuring Viola Léger, showed both the weaknesses and great strengths of Maillet's writing. Robert Lévesque has said of it that the author "n'a nullement su renouveler et l'imaginaire de son écriture théâtrale et la force d'une certaine langue qu'elle a jadis maîtrisée": *Le Devoir*, 14 décembre 1982, p. 6. Two of the seven monologues certainly were afflicted by "un folklorisme à bout de souffle" and a static quality, whereas others, old ("La Guerre" from *La Sagouine*) and new, went beyond the picturesque in treating ironically and/or colourfully vital moments of Acadian existence.
- 21 "La politique des bas prix", *Liberté*, 134 (mars-avril, 1981), p. 54.
- 22 "L'exigence de ce qui, même dans le désespoir, est incapable de mourir", *Le Devoir*, 28 novembre 1981: "[notre littérature] est devenue la basse-cour de quelques professeurs d'université et de cette Acadie arriviste. . . qui a l'outrecuidance de s'afficher tout à la fois de Moncton, de Montréal et d'Ottawa afin de nous mieux parler de ce nulle part de l'empire et en récolter baveusement tous les marbres. . .".