

A Many-Coloured Kite

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Le garçon au cerf-volant, Monique Corriveau. Fides, 1974. 132 pp. \$3.95 paper.

Modern linguists recognize six functions in language, among which speaker, listener and message are only the most obvious. Another function is that which obligates speaker and listener to ensure that they use the same code: "By gay, do you mean happy or -- ?" This is metalanguage, or language about language. A similar phenomenon exists in literature, such as novels about novelists, poems about writing poetry, and references to other works. This could be called metaliterature.

Contrary to what one might think, metaliterature is not a form of inter-authorial communication. To read a powerful evocation of a writer's response to literature is to confirm our own responsiveness as readers. More important, to read and fantasize the rôle of creative artist is to exercise, in however subtle a fashion, our own creative abilities. It seems almost a compliment, therefore, to say of Monique Corriveau's latest novel, *Le garçon au cerf-volant*, that it is truly a work of metaliterature. But her book deserves even better compliments, for it is a remarkably sensitive piece of writing, well-plotted, imaginative, and highly readable.

The two principal characters are Norbert and Arnaud Colin, father and son embodying exterior and interior portraits of the writer. Colin père is at once a romanticized and a realistic figure: "On dirait qu'il appartient à une autre planète dont il ressent encore l'attraction physique" (29) -- an apt description of plenty of writers and poets. Ill at ease with himself and with the world, he is regarded as a "bon à rien" by his neighbours, for (as Corriveau acidly observes) he is neither sailor, fisherman nor farmer. Chronically impoverished, he earns meagre support for his son and for his art by teaching and translating.

However, it is the young Arnaud who is the protagonist of the story. In many respects a conventional hero, he is well-travelled, adventurous and clever -- a veritable musketeer. But he is also clearly a writer in embryo, keenly sensitive to all sorts of stimuli, with a vivid imagination and the same "souci des mots" (33) as his father. Uniting the archetypes of Magician and Knight Errant (the former embraces writers and other such figures), he is a perfect medium for the reader's fantasy.

But Arnaud's ambivalence takes another, more intriguing form: that of Hermaphrodite. Since the death of his mother, Arnaud has in subtle and touching ways assumed the rôle of wife to his father. At the same time, he is obviously as masculine as ever a hero was, and indeed becomes involved in puppy love with a secondary female character. The

concurrent emphasis Corriveau places on these two aspects is not contradictory. As Jung discovered, the hermaphrodite -- particularly the hermaphroditic child -- is one of the most important archetypes, ubiquitous in literature and mythology. Significantly, the effect Arnaud eventually has upon his father is precisely what Jung would have predicted: that of "a subduer of conflicts and a bringer of healing."¹

Inasmuch as Arnaud actually becomes identified with his father's lost novel, it might be said that his rôle as unifier and healer serves to convey the therapeutic powers of literature as a whole. This is confirmed by the way Corriveau develops her primary symbol, the cerf-volant (kite) of the title. Arnaud's craftsmanship as a builder of kites is the parallel of his father's as a writer. With admirable economy of means, Corriveau uses the kite to symbolize the imagination, the novel itself, and of course love -- all the ways mankind reaches out from his solitude. Or as Arnaud's father has written: "L'amour des autres, ce pont jeté sur l'inconnaissable" (39). Not "l'inconnu", which might be conquered, but "l'inconnaissable", an absurd universe which we traverse (overgo rather than overcome) only with human concourse, human meaning. The superposition of symbolic contents -- the kite as novel, and as bridge of human contact -- points out the profoundly societal nature of literature. To read is not to withdraw egotistically into oneself; it is to enter more deeply into one's civilization.

I think it is Lévi-Strauss who remarks somewhere that the Pueblo Indian need not recognize the structures of meaning underlying his myths in order to be affected by them. Similarly, the young reader need neither perceive nor understand the sometimes abstruse materials that literary criticism unearths. The child, like every reader, is subliminally affected by what he reads, the more so if what he reads possesses great archetypal power.

It is worth observing that *Le garçon au cerf-volant* is written almost entirely in the present tense. When people recount their dreams they do so in the same manner. Present indicative narration may be the modern equivalent of the aoristic tense, which was above all used in the telling of myths. And there we have it: Monique Corriveau has infused her novel with both the immediacy of dreams and the immensity of mythology. In doing so she has also written a moving and enjoyable story.

NOTES

- ¹ C. G. Jung, "The Hermaphroditism of the Child", in C. G. Jung & C. Kerényi, *Essays on a Science of Mythology*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 93.

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