

L'Agneau Égaré de Langevin

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Une Chaîne dans le parc, André Langevin. Le Cercle du livre de France, 1974. 316 pp. \$6.50 paper.

The striking feature of Langevin's fifth novel¹ is that it parallels in so many respects two really major Canadian achievements, one by Réjean Ducharme and the other by W.O. Mitchell. These authors also wrote for adults but skilfully used third person narration from the point of view of a child protagonist. All three writers succeed to a remarkable degree in immersing themselves in the mental and emotional processes of a young boy or girl. Langevin's little Pierrrot and Ducharme's Bérénice² suffer through their wretched childhoods in the early forties, while Mitchell's Brian O'Connell³ enjoys a comparatively happy family life somewhat earlier. It is curious to note not only that Langevin and Ducharme, but also Marie-Claire Blais and Gabrielle Roy, all portray French Canadian childhood, whether within or without the family, as a time of absolute misery. This is in contrast to the basically tender though not very demonstrative love and care Mitchell's Brian or Ernest Buckler's David Canaan⁴ receive. Perhaps each set of authors, one in a negative and one in a positive way, is only attempting to reiterate the well-worn theme that a child needs love in order to develop normally.

Actually, in this present work, Langevin has reverted to a story of an abandoned child, which was the topic of his first novel, *Evadé de la nuit*, back in 1951. It's generally conceded that his early attempt was marred by lack of unity and monotony of style. However, given the large cast of characters and the inherent problems of flashbacks freely interspersed both with new happenings and highly imaginative reflections, the unity of *Chaîne dans le parc* is well maintained, unless for the strange interpolation of the peculiar conduct and suicide of *l'homme en bleu* (not to be confused with the *homme bleu*). As for the defect of style, that has not been entirely overcome. Often the unwieldy sentences occupy almost half a page, thus precluding swift, clear reading. Worse still, they could not possibly represent the thought or verbal pattern of an eight-year-old, neither in their breadth of philosophical experience nor in their complicated articulateness.

This novel, too, bears Langevin's ineradicable trademark. Apparently all his heroes, or non-heroes, are twentieth-century versions of the mythical Sisyphus, and are thus doomed to failure because of the hopelessly uphill circumstances in which they are placed. What can Alain Dubois⁵ do about his unfaithful wife? He can neither alter her complete lack of responsibility nor the moralistic attitude of a small Quebec town. Similarly, the ex-priest Dupas⁶ finds himself unequal to

the task of spiritual rescue of a fellow worker. Now, in this last novel, Langevin places the eight-year old Pierrot in the clutches of frustrated old maiden aunts who at every turn indicate their foreknowledge that he is going to repeat all his (evil) father's sins. On one occasion, pleading for love, the little fellow inquires, "*Si je te disais que je vais tout faire pour t'aimer, est-ce que tu m'aimerais?*" The aunt walks on without answering and the child tries to insist. Finally the reply is, "*Passé devant. Tes questions, c'est de la pure méchanceté. Comme ton père.*"⁷ This is on the part of the more ferocious Aunt Maria. Aunt Rose occasionally shows signs of trying to sound sympathetic. Since there's no way for a child to please such adults, he's considered incorrigible and is sent off to yet another orphanage, where he will learn a trade.

In a physical sense, the setting of the story is almost entirely in Montreal, in the area of Jacques Cartier Bridge and Molson's Brewery, except that much of the story consists of the child's marvellous flights of imagination. These continually interrupt the present with recollections of facts and fantasies relating to his previous four years in the orphanage. Then too, there are all sorts of fresh flashes of fancy growing out of his extremely varied new experiences. Such fertility and facility of mind are obviously a merciful necessity for coping with the terrible emotional isolation, both at the orphanage and in the course of his brief and insecure stay within the four walls of his uncle's home. Strangely, there's no reason given as to why the uncle and the soured maiden aunts had decided to take the child in, or why, in the first place, they had sent him away to an institution at the time of his mother's death. The drunken father had escaped his responsibilities by joining the army.

At first the sounds of the nuns' (corneilles) clappers and the noise of the feet of hundreds of children filing past him along the endless corridors had made the bewildered child's head vibrate, but after a while *l'homme bleu* had appeared and helped him. It was this extra-sensory presence which had told him when to fight back for all he was worth--with the wholesome result that the big bully, Justin, who had tormented the life out of him for so long, became a meek and well-mannered citizen of the community--but with a broken nose. There was also the cat, Balibou, of the many faces and shapes, who flew from one story to another. Pierrot's most faithful audience was *le Chinois*, a mongoloid who listened to stories with pleasure but no understanding--and then resumed his grubbing for ants to eat. Among the medieval indignities was the bath, with two boys at a time in a tub of second-hand water! Langevin goes out of his way to describe the harshness of the holy sisters, to whom the children gave the names such as Pied-de-Cochon or Sainte Tomate. The exception was the smiling, loving Sainte Agnès, who was promptly dispatched elsewhere because of her lack of severity. Doubtless there were many overworked nuns with painfully limited notions of child nurture, though this seems by way of becoming a matter of historical interest and no longer a major moral or human problem deserving of so much author emphasis. Thanks to the pill, the decline in the number of nuns, and the increasing efforts to place unwanted children in foster homes, the topic is much less relevant today than thirty-five years ago. It seems, rather, to be part and parcel of the fashionable hostility of the literary and the liberal to Catholicism

or any religion which is lacking in genuine love. In any case, the punch of the book is not achieved by the destructive criticism of church-run orphanages or by the author's eagerness to underline the eternal gulf between French and English. Rather, the strength of the novel lies in the in-depth study of a child's mind and emotions under an astonishing number of conditions.

It is not clear, and doesn't need to be precisely so, how few weeks or days of the summer holidays Pierrot spends with his uncle and aunts. Within three days he makes three important and picturesque friendships. On the first day, just before he has swallowed the last mouthful of breakfast, he is ordered to go out and play. He meets the tubercular Gaston, nick-named le Rat, on whom the police keep close watch because he's known as a chronic petty criminal. Pierrot, astutely, has his reservations about the friendship that is offered him, and seems to realize some of le Rat's sadism is caused by his knowledge that he will soon die. Le Rat wears his black hair long like a girl, is thin as a scarecrow, and skilfully wields a chain with a lead at the end of it. With it he is able to take aim, hit objects, and maim or trip people. The second day, Pierrot forms a beautiful attachment with Jane, the red-haired ten-year-old daughter of a call-girl with an English-speaking husband overseas. The two children complement each other marvellously, and keep planning to stage a long journey away from their unloving relatives. This part of the story is most appealing and could in itself stand as an excellent short novel. Needless to say, both families try to keep the youngsters apart--till Jane's mother spends an anxious night because her little daughter has not returned home. The third acquaintance is that of the wonderful, warm, typically normal French Canadian family that welcomes the children at any time, and would even take Pierrot in permanently, if allowed to do so. The mighty mother in this home goes by the name of Maman Pouf and, like the stereotype she is, she always has a baby at her breast.

In spite of this being a child's book and the period being some thirty-five years ago, there is a good deal of very explicit sex. Pierrot doesn't understand why Isabelle and le Rat, who are in the act of making love very noisily, send him away so harshly. Nor does he feel quite right that he and Jane have experimented with sex. Langevin manages his descriptions with dignity and, in the case of the children, with delicacy, avoiding the coarseness of some currently prolific authors of "art novels".

The title arises from the frequent emphasis on the child's view of the orphanage as a cage and the outside world as a park, the gates of which are to be opened by his *homme bleu*. Actually, nothing in the park is as Pierrot dreamed it would be. Instead, he finds himself tripped up by le Rat's menacing chain. At his meeting with his uncle, he rushes joyously forward to embrace him, but is rebuffed as though he were a dog leaping for his throat. His questions are always considered idiotic. Over and over again he resolves to retreat into himself and to be as cold as ice.

Probably Langevin does as good a job as can be done, in his overly ambitious attempts to express a child's feelings in words. In practice, what he puts into Pierrot's mouth are often the matured ideas evolved

by an adult as he analyzes the situation. This is not at all the same thing as the instinctual but inarticulate gut reaction of a child. It's a difficulty inherent in complicated situations in which the youthful narrator is unable to understand, let alone explain his emotions. With similar problems, I think Ducharme has succeeded better in his powerful novel *l'Avalée des avalés* because he avoided so much complicated, philosophical comment. Similarly, in the beautiful *Who has Seen the Wind*, Mitchell maintained much of the direct simplicity of childhood. Still, all in all, Langevin offers a telling account of the agonies and frustration of a solitary child who hungers for love.

NOTES

- ¹ André Langevin, *Evadé de la nuit, Poussière sur la ville, Le Temps des Hommes, L'Élan d'Amérique, Chaîne dans le parc.*
- ² Réjean Ducharme, *L'Avalée des avalés.*
- ³ W. O. Mitchell, *Who has seen the Wind.*
- ⁴ Ernest Buckler, *The Mountain and the Valley.*
- ⁵ André Langevin, *Poussière sur la ville.*
- ⁶ Langevin, *Le Temps des hommes.*
- ⁷ Langevin, *Chaîne dans le parc*, p. 132.

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