September 1977

Acadia Transplanted: The Importance of Evangeline Deusse in the Work of Antonine Maillet

Jonathan M. Weiss

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq

Recommended Citation
Colby Library Quarterly, Volume 13, no.3, September 1977, p.173-185

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby. For more information, please contact mfkelly@colby.edu.
Acadia Transplanted:
The Importance of Evangéline Deusse in the Work of Antonine Maillet

by JONATHAN M. WEISS

THE ACADIAN WRITER Antonine Maillet, although best known for the plays and novels she has been writing since 1958, is also the author of a comparative study of Rabelais and the Acadian folklore tradition (Rabelais et les traditions populaires en Acadie, published in 1971). She is not, by nature, a detached erudite; what interests her in comparing Rabelais with the farmers and fishermen of New Brunswick is how the latter managed to survive and to keep their language intact for almost four hundred years, despite the deportation (le grand dérangement) of 1755, despite past (and also present) efforts to assimilate the French-speaking communities of New Brunswick into the English-speaking majority. This survival was possible, she implies, because the legends and traditions of fifteenth and sixteenth century France, those that Rabelais transcribed in his Cinq Livres, crossed the Atlantic, were transplanted and took root in North America, providing the Acadian people with a distinct and unique identity.

The Acadians are, for Antonine Maillet, the very symbol of transplantation. They came from France during the seventeenth century and settled in what were then remote regions of the provinces known today as Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. In 1755 the English, now masters of Acadia, deported them aboard ships; their isolation became even more complete, more personal, as families and friends were separated and sent off on different boats. In the following years more than three thousand Acadians returned to France (although not all stayed), while smaller groups settled in New England and along the Atlantic coast of the United States, in Louisiana, and in Québec. But a very persistent if small group of Acadians transplanted themselves back in Acadia. They slowly, and with much trepidation, made their way to New Brunswick, there to hide and to flee all contacts with the English for two to three generations.

Antonine Maillet describes this period of transplantation as the most fertile episode in Acadian history. The Acadians slowly rebuilt their settlements; they cleared the land, built docks and dams, stayed for a while then moved on to a new, better area along the coast; they met new

families, old friends and relatives, and storytelling became the favorite way to pass the time. A popular culture was born which was oral in its expression and which translated the desire of the Acadians to persevere even if this meant beginning anew over and over again.

Antonine Maillet's works are an attempt to portray the Acadian people, although not in any specifically realistic way. Myths and legends play as important a role as does veracity (witness the transposed Christ story of Emmanuel à Joseph à Davit or the legend of the rum-running Mariaagélas). The author is well aware of the limitations of such an approach which situates all her works within the same Acadian coastal area in southeast New Brunswick, and calls for repeated use of a number of characters (La Sagouine, Gapi, Don l'Orignal, etc.). She says that she is interested in the inner landscape resulting from both real and projected experiences of Acadia (where she spent her childhood and adolescence, but which she has now left to live in Québec): "J'ai décidé de n'écrire jamais que mon monde intérieur, celui qui s'est construit petit à petit à même la réalité qui figurait dans mon champ de vision." ("I decided never to write anything but my inner world, the world which has been built little by little from the reality which came into my field of vision.")

Until the publication early in 1976 of the play Evangeline Deusse (deusse being the feminine form of deux in the Acadian dialect), all of Antonine Maillet's works were set in that specific part of Acadia with which she is most familiar. But Evangeline Deusse represents a radical departure from that setting, for the play occurs entirely within a public park in Montréal. Just as significantly, the play employs only one Acadian character out of four, and only two Canadian characters. There appears to be no doubt that Evangeline Deusse represents a critical point in the literary career of Madame Maillet, a point at which the Acadia of Bouctouche and Richibouctou is transplanted in Québec. In the following analysis, I shall try to show how this transplantation affects Madame Maillet's "monde intérieur" and gives it a decidedly broader perspective.

Antonine Maillet's first work, written in 1958, is a novel entitled Pointe-aux-Coques. It is the story of a young woman, born in Acadia but brought up in the United States, who returns to her native village as principal of the local primary school. It is, perhaps unwittingly, an Acadian Maria Chapdelaine, in that it provides the motivation for survival of the French in Acadia just as Hémon's novel encouraged the French in Québec to remain on their land. The narrator is attracted to the small New Brunswick fishing village because of her descent, her

2. Ibid., pp. 8–9.
4. Madame Maillet's most recent work, Gapi (Montréal: Leméac, 1976) has appeared after Evangeline Deusse. It is a play set in Acadia, but as it is actually a re-written version of Gapi et Sullivan, which was published two years before Evangeline Deusse, it doesn't affect my theory.
“race” (in the French-Canadian sense of the term); like the people of the Lac St-Jean region in Hémon’s novel, the inhabitants of Pointe-aux-Coques are all of one group: “tous ensemble d’une descendance de Chrétiens, de Français et de pêcheurs” (“all of us descended from Christians, Frenchmen and fishermen”), and, as an old lady remarks, “je pouvons plus abandonner” (“we ain’t gonna give up”). But there is another, more striking resemblance to Maria Chapdelaine. The narrator of Pointe-aux-Coques sees herself torn between a northern and a southern pole of attraction. She is fascinated by a rather fanciful character called Musique, who, though Acadian, lives in the city where his father is in the construction business. But the man who captures the narrator’s heart is the François Paradis of the novel (except that he doesn’t meet the tragic end of Hémon’s hero); he is a young fisherman who periodically goes north to study how the traditional Acadian village can, through cooperatives, meet the challenge of the twentieth century. “Jean, c’est un homme du passé” (“Jean is a man of the past”), says his father, Oncle Dan, to which the narrator responds: “Jean, c’était l’homme de l’avenir” (“Jean was the man of the future”).

So the narrator of Antonine Maillet’s first novel chooses to remain in the land of her ancestors and to transplant her own life in the simple fishing village of Pointe-aux-Coques. This novel serves two important functions within the scope of the works to follow: it delimits the author’s field of vision, and it sets forth very clearly the theme of perseverance or survival which was to mark all of her writing. Survival in Pointe-aux-Coques means resisting the encroachments of contemporary Canadian society on the Acadian way of life. Oncle Dan puts the problem succinctly: “les jeunes de nos jours ont tendance à quitter la pêche, pour aller gagner au Labrador ou dans l’Ontario.” (“Young folks today are always wantin’ to get out of fishin’ an’ go to Labrador or Ontario to earn money.”) Antonine Maillet also evokes this problem in her thesis on Rabelais. There are, she says, two types of Acadians, one group which tries at all costs to “sauver le patrimoine et l’identité de cette Acadie devenue presque mythique et qui ne correspond plus à rien depuis un siècle sur le plan national” (“save the heritage and the identity of an Acadia which has become almost a myth and which for a century has no longer had any meaning on a national scale”), and the other group which decides to “renoncer à cette identité, qu’il traîne pourtant malgré lui, en émigrant dans les villes ou les pays industrialisés” (“renounce this identity which it nevertheless can’t shake off, by emigrating to the cities or to the industrial areas”). It would be unfair to categorize Madame

5. Antonine Maillet, Pointe-aux-Coques (Montréal: Leméac, 1972), p. 69. For an explanation of the dialectical variant (half-way between je peux and nous pouvons), see p. 102 of this book.
6. Ibid., p. 92.
Mailet as wholly within the first group, for this consists largely of the Acadian elite who, for example, proclaimed the national holiday to be the Feast of the Assumption and designed an Acadian flag consisting of a French tricolor with the *stella maris*, in Papal colors, emblazoned on the center stripe. But legends and folklore are the counterpart to patriotic flags and holidays: they affirm an identity without brashly proclaiming it. And this affirmation of an Acadian identity, struggling to survive despite the lure of an easier life in the cities, is what Madame Maillet has done throughout her literary career.

I would thus characterize Madame Maillet’s initial attitude towards Acadia as defensive. Her works prior to *Evangéline Deusse* tend to focus inward upon the Acadian people. Her most famous play, the dramatic monologue entitled *La Sagouine*, is, as has been shown, a search for identity couched in the theme of political protest (*la contestation politique*).

In this regard, the most important part of the play occurs in the segment called “le recensement” (the census) and describes the reactions of the seventy-two year old charwoman when census takers ask her what her nationality is:

> Je vivons en Amérique, ben je sons pas des Américains. . . . Nous autres, je vivons au Canada; ça fait que je devons plutôt être des Canadjens, ça me r’semble. . . . Ben ça se peut pas non plus, parce que les Jones, pis les Caroll, pis les MacFadden, c’est pas des gens de notre race. ça, pis ça vit au Canada itou. Si i’ sont des Canadjens, je pouvons pas en être, nous autres. Par rapport qu’ils sont des Anglais, pis nous autres, je sons des Français. . . . Non, je sons pas tout à fait des Français, je pouvons pas dire ça. . . . Je sons plutôt des Canadjens français, qu’ils nous avons dit. . . . Ça se peut pas non plus. ça. Les Canadjens français c’est du monde qui vit à Québec. . . . Ben comment c’est que je pouvons être des Québécois si je ne vivons point à Québec? Pour l’amour de Dieu, où c’est que je vivons, nous autres? . . . En Acadie, qu’ils nous avons dit, et je sons des Acadiens. Ça fait que j’avons entrepris de répondre à leur question de nationalité comme ça: des Acadiens, que je leur avons dit. . . . Ben ils avons point voulu écrire ce mot-là dans leur liste. les encenseurs. Parce qu’ils avons eu pour leur dire que l’Acadie, c’est point un pays, ça, pis un Acadian c’est point une nationalité, par rapport que c’est pas écrit dans les livres de Jos Graphie.12

(We live in America. all right, but we ain’t Americans. . . . Us, we live in Canada, so we’re ‘spose to be Canadjun. I guess. . . . But that ain’t right neither, ‘cause the Jones and the Carrois and the MacFaddens ain’t folks like us, and they live in Canada too. If *they’re* Canadjuns, we ain’t. ‘Cause they’re English, and us, we’re French. . . . No, we ain’t really French, can’t say we are. . . . They tell us we’re French Canadjuns. . . . But that ain’t true neither. French Canadjuns is folks livin’ in Quebec. . . . So how can we be Quebeckers if we ain’t livin’ in Quebec? For the love of God, where on earth do we live? In Acadia, they tell us, an’ we’re Acadjuns. So when they came and asked ‘bout our nashunalitée, we tried to answer ‘em like this: we’re Acadjuns, that’s what we told ‘em. . . . Well, don’t y’ know, they wouldn’t put that word down on their lists, these census people. ‘Cause they say that Acadia, that ain’t no country, and an Acadjun, that ain’t no nashunalitée. ‘Cause it ain’t written down there in the Joe-Graffy books.)

10. See ibid., p. 12.
The same theme appears, although not as graphically, in other works. On a mangé la dune, a novel published in 1962, concerns a young girl who is passing into adulthood, but whose world is entirely limited by the dunes surrounding her Acadian fishing village. She refuses to believe that Montréal isn’t on the other side of the dune, or that the United States isn’t just beyond a pond, or that Louisiana isn’t on the road to Grand-Pré: “Non, elle ne laisserait pas, comme ça, s’écrouler son monde à elle, son Pôle Nord en haut du champs, ses États de l’autre côté des Michaud, sa Louisiane exilée.”13 (“No, she wouldn’t let her world crumble just like that, her North Pole at the top of the field, her United States on the other side of Michaud’s property, her Louisiana in exile.”) In Les Crasseux, a play written in 1966, the defensiveness is transposed into a conflict of social class. The bourgeoisie of an Acadian village (“les Gens d’En Haut”) wants to expel the poor fishermen of the same town (“les Gens d’En Bas”) when it is revealed that a young boy from “En Bas” is courting the daughter of a merchant and that the barber’s son is dating a working class girl. The “Gens d’En Bas” end up being evicted from their homes when the Mayoress obtains a ministerial order providing for a public garden on their land, but the poor have the upper hand in their battle with the rich. They pick up and transplant themselves right behind the barber’s shop, on a vacant lot which they obtained for a dollar through the same governmental department that issued the expulsion order. As Don l’Orignal comments at the end: “à force de se frotter aux renards, je finissent par avoir du poil”14 (an expression meaning roughly that when one has dealings with foxes, one ends up being as clever as they are).

Later works continue in the same vein. In Mariaagélas (1972) a whole village attempts to survive in spite of federal fishing regulations and other laws which inhibit the traditional Acadian way of life. The attempt is only partly successful, for participation in the rum-running of the 1930s, although it provides the opportunity for some good nose-thumbing at federal authorities, profits the wealthy crime syndicates more than it does the poor Acadians. Emmanuel à Joseph à Davit (1975), the most allegorical of Antonine Maillet’s works, presents us with a modern nativity story in which the birth of Emmanuel is completely assimilated into Acadian folklore. This novel immediately precedes Évangéline Deussé, but its posture is still defensive; Gapi, a fisherman, expresses this when he comments on the absence of his friend Sullivan after the birth of the child: “I’ voulit naviguer par les mers du large, le navigueux, pour y charcher le paradis; ben il arait peut-être mieux fait de l’esperer chus eux comme j’avons toutes fait.”15 (“He’d be wantin’ to sail out on the open sea, the

old sailor, lookin' for paradise out there. Well, he'd do better to set right here and wait for it like us all.

By comparison with the works that precede it, *Evangéline Deusse* marks a transition from a defensive to an offensive position. No longer is the author concerned with protecting the traditional Acadian way of life, since this identity is so indelible that it can be transplanted to Montréal. The choice of *Evangéline* as a title and as the name of the main character is in itself surprising and significant, for Madame Maillet always eschewed the Evangéline story as belonging to the elite rather than to the people. La Sagouine says of the legend: "c'était une belle histoère . . . ben moi j'aimais encore mieux les contes de mon défunt père."16 ("It were a right beautiful story, . . . but I liked my late dad's stories a lot better.") Madame Maillet likens the Evangeline of Longfellow (via Haliburton)17 to the invented Acadian flag. This "évangelinisme," as she calls it, "n'a rien à voir avec la conservation des véritables traditions populaires en Acadie"18 ("has nothing to do with the preservation of true popular traditions in Acadia"); the Acadian people, she maintains, are less influenced by the Evangéline story than the Acadian intellectual elite would like to believe. She concedes that Evangéline provides Acadians with "une image d'esperance" ("an image of hope") but says that Longfellow's story shocks her literary sensitivity and is too abstract to have any meaning as a legend of Acadian survival.19

What Madame Maillet has done is to create not a copy of the virgin, selfless Evangeline of the Longfellow poem but rather a kind of anti-Evangeline, full of life, lusty, and above all aggressive. This character dominates the entire play and creates dynamism in what would otherwise be an actionless plot.

In fact, the play begins very slowly, and it isn't until the third (of five) tableaux that the characters come out of their shells and begin to talk with one another. As the play begins, we see a "Stop," a "traversier," sitting alone in a Montréal park. He is an almost mute Quebecker, ageless, originally from the Lac Saint-Jean region. His job is to cross people from one side of the busy thoroughfare to the other, holding up a small stop sign. "Je travarse Ie monde," he says,20 using a pun that defines him immediately as a wanderer (the meaning in French is either "I help people cross" or "I cross the world"). We first see the Stop help across an old Rabbi, he too a wanderer, having been chased from Eastern Europe by the Nazis, thence to France, to South America and now to Canada. As the Rabbi sits on a bench and opens his Yiddish newspaper, Evangéline

19. Ibid., p. 6.
20. Antonine Maillet, *Evangéline Deusse* (Montréal: Léméac, 1975), p. 27. Further quotations from this edition will be identified by page references in parentheses.
comes in, crossing the busy road on her own. She is eighty years old but acts as if she were sixty, and she has just moved from New Brunswick to Montréal to live with her son and daughter-in-law. She carries with her a small fir tree, sent to her from Acadia, which she proceeds to transplant at the foot of a rather large plane tree. The symbolism of this tree is obvious: it is a piece of Acadia which, like Evangeline herself, has been transplanted into a new country. The Stop suddenly leaves to help the last member of the group of exiles across: a Breton fisherman, born in France, who has spent the last fifty of his eighty-two years in Canada. He carries with him a wood model boat which he is carving and which identifies him in the same way as the tree identifies Evangeline or the Yiddish newspaper characterizes the Rabbi.

It is Evangeline who, through words, in her strange, archaic Acadian dialect, serves as the catalyst to bring the experiences of the three other exiles together. At first there is little communication from anyone but her. The Rabbi is too shy, too deferential to speak; the Stop, though full of good intentions, finds it almost impossible to express himself, and the Breton seems preoccupied with his own thoughts. But as Evangeline talks, as though to herself, the others warm to her. Significantly, it is language which helps her break the ice with the Breton. Whereas neither the Rabbi nor the Stop seems to understand her when she asks the latter “a’houque-t-i’ des tapis, votre mère?” (p. 32) (“does your mother hook rugs?”)—using the verb “houquer” instead of the usual French “crocheter”), the Breton suddenly remembers: “houquer... je me souviens de ce mot-là, en effet. On l’emploie en Normandie et peut-être au nord de la Bretagne” (“houquer... I do remember that word. It’s used in Normandy and perhaps in northern Brittany”). As for the Rabbi, the Breton’s story of exile from his native land awakens his interest and he makes common cause with the three others. The French language has become here an instrument enabling people from diverse backgrounds to communicate, but more than that it has provided a common linguistic and cultural ground for uniting the characters of the play. As Evangeline remarks: “une parsoune qui comprend les mots de ta langue, est peut-être ben pas loin de te comprendre toi itou” (p. 100). (“If a person understands your language, he’s sure as shootin’ gonna understand you, too.”)

Most of the first half of the play is taken up with Evangeline’s stories of herself, and here she reveals herself to be as witty and as spunky as any of her predecessors (La Sagouine, Maria à Gélas, etc.). She tells how, as a going away gift, she was given a chaise longue which she promptly got rid of to a bed-ridden invalid: “une chaise longue!” she remarks, indignantly, “c’est-i’ parce qu’une parsoune quitte le pays qu’a’doit le quitter les pieds le premier?” (p. 35). (“A lounge chair! Just ’cause a person is leavin’ his country ain’t no reason why he’s gotta go out feet first!”) She cannot understand why her daughter-in-law rejects the traditional hand
embroidered handkerchiefs in favor of throw-away Kleenex: “j’allons toutes achever nos vies dans la poussière et ça sera de la poussière qui sera dans ton suaire. Ben ça sera-ti-i’ une raison ça pour t’ensevelir dans les Kleenex?” (p. 33). (“We’re all gonna finish our lives in the dust anyway, and your grave’ll be all full of dust. So is that any reason to have yerself all wrapped up in Kleenex?”)

But what really defines this vigorous Acadian lady as an anti-Evangeline are her reactions to Longfellow’s poem. During the second tableau the Breton reads to her from the French translation of Evangeline. Presumably, Evangeline has never heard the story in detail before, and her reactions point out the contrast between her and Longfellow’s heroic martyr. When the Breton recounts how the English shut the Acadian men up in a church in Grand-Pré just as Evangeline was about to marry Gaëriel Lajeunesse, Evangeline Deusse is astonished: why weren’t the women shut up with the men? Why did the men let themselves be shut up? “Il leur manquait une femme ou deux dans l’église à nos hounnes, pour les organiser, pis les fouetter, pis leu faire honte” (p. 45). (“Our men needed a woman or two in the church with ‘em, to organize ‘em, to whip ‘em into shape, an’ to make ‘em ’shamed of ‘emselves.”) When the Breton reads that Evangeline hid her face in her apron and cried when her fiancé was made prisoner, Evangeline Deusse responds that when a similar disaster struck her small town—a storm causing a shipwreck that claimed fifty-three men—she and the other women didn’t hide their faces; they fought the storm, hauled in the cables, sorted through the shipwreck and waited until all the work was done before breaking down in sorrow. And when Evangeline Deusse hears that the British set fire to the church at Grand-Pré, she is indignant: “Le feu à l’église? (Elle s’empare de son seau.) Ils ont laissé brûler l’église! Ben tous les puits étaient-i’ taris? Je voudrais en ouère un s’en venir sous mes yeux mettre le feu à l’église. On fait une chaîne dans c’tes cas-là” (p. 46). (“They set fire to the church? [She picks up her bucket.] They let the church burn! Was all the wells dried up? You jest let someone come and set fire to the church under my nose. In them cases, we get a bucket brigade going.”)

If Evangeline Deusse, in her refusal to submit to force, is unlike Longfellow’s heroine, in other ways she resembles her predecessor. In particular, she feels herself to be exiled from her own land in the same way as Evangeline was forced into exile by the English. Only this time, the “English” have used more subtle methods than deportation:

Ben sus deux siècles, j’en avons passé un à nous en revenir de Louisiane et à chercher nos terres et nos dides que j’avions perdues en chemin; et j’avons passé l’autre à reboiser, ces terres-là, pis à les replanter. Ben voulez-vous saouère, Messieurs? C’est justement à l’heure que j’avons fini de payer nos églises et nos écoles, pis achevé de jeter nos trappes à

21. Translated by L. Pamphile Lemay and published in Québec by Delisle in 1870.
l'eau, qu'ils s'en venont nous dire que la mer est vide et la terre pourrie, et que je serions aussi ben de mouver à la ville dans les shops gouvernées encore un coup par les Anglais. . . . Encore un coup ils nous déportent; ben c'te fois-citie, sans même nous fornir les goelettes. (p. 48)

(Well, outa two centuries, we spent one of 'em comin' back from Louisiana and lookin' for our land and deeds we'd lost on the way; and we spent the other century plantin' trees an' puttin' in crops. Well, wouldn' ya know, folks. Just when we was gettin' our church and our schools all paid up, and just when we was settin' our traps in the water, they come an' tell us the sea's empty an' the land's all rotten an' we'd best be movin' on to the city to work for the English again in their shops. They're doin' it again, deportin' us, only this time they ain't givin' us no boats.)

Evangéline Deussé is different from La Sagouine and all Madame Maillet's previous characters because she sees herself not simply as an Acadian exile but as part of all the exiled of the earth, all the dispos­sessed. It is not simply her coming to Montréal that has made her realize this; it is really her contact with three other exiled people whose existence she had never suspected that makes her turn outwards and accept the Breton, the Rabbi and the Quebecker as if they too were Acadian. As she says, "avec un pareil lotte d'exilés, je pourrions nous crouer encore en 1755" (p. 50). ("With this lot of exiles, I'm thinkin' we could still be back in 1755.")

Just as Evangéline Deussé sees her own situation confirmed by that of the other exiles, the latter see themselves reflected in her. For the Breton, it is the sea and the old French dialect that make him realize his similarity to Evangéline; for the Rabbi, it is the notion of wandering from place to place, of being uprooted, that attracts his attention. The Stop is perhaps the most enigmatic of all the characters; he never really sees his similarity as a Quebecker to Evangéline's fate until the very end of the play when, finally, the sense of the story of the deportation sinks in. At that point, he tells Evangéline the story of Maria Chapdelaine, emphasizing that the Québec heroine stayed on her land and refused the temptation to leave for the United States. Evangéline immediately sees that this story is radically different from her own and that, by extension, the fate of the people of Québec, unlike that of the Breton or the Rabbi, does not parallel hers. She tells the Stop: "ça veut dire que les genses de par chus vous restont sus leurs terres, ben que nous autres, je nous faisons déporter. C'est ça la destinée" (pp. 104–105). ("That means that folks like you ain't left their land, not like folks like us what gets themselves deported. That's fate.") But for all that this Quebecker is still an exilé, though in a more subtle sense than the others, for he cannot recall his own name and seems to have no idea of his own identity. He and his ancestors may in fact have remained on the same land for more than two hundred years, but this land does not yet have a name, and the country to which these people belong does not yet have a destiny. One sees in this portrayal of a Québécois an idea similar to that expressed by the indépendantiste Québec poet, Gaston Miron:

Published by Digital Commons @ Colby, 1977 9
Il est triste et pêle-mêle dans les étoiles tombées
livide, muet, nulle part et effaré, vaste fantôme
il est ce pays seul avec lui-même et neiges et rocs
un pays que jamais ne rejoint le soleil natal

(He is sad and confused among the fallen stars
Colorless, silent, nowhere and bewildered, a huge shadow
He is this country alone with himself and snow and rocks
A country never warmed by its own sun)

But Antonine Maillet has wanted to create more than a political or sociological statement on Canadians who feel they are strangers in their own land. She has also created in this play a love story whose meaning, like that of the play itself, transcends time and place.

It should be pointed out that the love that grows between Evangéline and the Breton is less of an emotional involvement than it is the symbolic attachment of two octogenarians who share a common heritage, a common language, and a common fate. The love is thus born of a coincidence of memories: the life Evangéline led on one side of the Atlantic ocean is similar to that in a small Breton fishing village on the other side. Not only are their memories of ships, storms and rum-running comparable but, as they begin to talk, the differences in their respective types of French begin to disappear. The Breton finds, hidden in his mind, more and more old words which are precisely those found in the Acadian dialect which Evangéline speaks: “La Bretagne était pleine de vieux mots acadiens,” he says, “si je m’y mets, je parviendrai à les dénigner tous” (p. 89). (“Brittany was full of old Acadian words; if I try, I’ll be able to dislodge them all.”) The Breton uses here the dialectical *dénigner* for the usual *dénicher*.

He gives Evangéline the wooden model ship that he has finished carving, and which he has now baptised *Evangéline*.

Moreover, Evangéline herself reveals that she once, long ago, had been in love with a man other than her husband. Their love affair was brief but passionate. Cyprien was a rum-runner who eventually disappeared: “il a pris la mer, un souère, et au petit jour, la mer l’a pris” (p. 66). (“He took to the sea one evening, and when the sun came up, the sea, it took him.”)

But one of Evangéline’s sons has eyes that look much more like those of Cyprien than those of his supposed legitimate father. This affair has become, for Evangéline, a reason for living; it represents her inexhaustible energy and her desire for adventure, a desire whose image is the sea.

Evangéline’s husband, Noré, never understood this desire: “Il a eu toute sa vie pour apprendre, Noré, qu’une Acadienne qu’a embrassé la mer une fois, ara le restant de ses jours les yeux rivés vers le large” (p. 67). (“Noré ain’t never understood that an Acadian woman who’s held the sea close to her one time is goin’ to stand there, gazin’ at the horizon, for the rest of her days.”) The Breton, like Cyprien, is symbolized by the

sea. He too is a dreamer, and he too searched for fortune and adventure running contraband liquor between Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon and the United States. He did this because, as he says, he is one of those who dream of finding "les paradis perdus" (p. 68), or, as Evangéline says of Cyprien, "il prenait la mer ... pour essayer de trouver de quoi au large, de quoi qu'une parsoune charche toute sa vie et qu'a'trouve rien qu'au petit matin de temps en temps" (p. 68). ("He took to the sea ... to try and find somethin' out there, the kind of thing you look for all yer life an' you find only once in a blue moon, just as the sun's comin' up.")

But the essential characteristic of this love between Evangéline and the Breton, like that between Evangéline and Cyprien, is its ephemerality. It is a brilliant but short lived flame. Here Madame Maillet has drawn a parallel with the Evangeline poem. In her play the Breton suddenly collapses (of a heart attack, apparently), and as he is dying with his head resting on Evangéline's lap, he evokes with her the sea, the coast, the ghost ships of their common mythological heritage. His last words are: "Evangéline ... allez en Louisiane ... qu'ri ... Gabriel" (p. 94). ("Evangéline ... go to Louisiana ... look for ... Gabriel.") The comparison with the end of Longfellow's poem is obvious and it will suffice to quote only a few lines:

Vainly he strove to whisper her name, for the accents unuttered
Died on his lips, and their motion revealed what his tongue would have spoken.
Vainly he strove to rise; and Evangeline, kneeling beside him
Kissed his dying lips, and laid his head on her bosom.

And as she pressed once more the lifeless head to her bosom,
Meekly she bowed her own, and murmured,
"Father, I thank thee."

Evangéline Deusse is the last person in the world to accept her fate with a meek "Father, I thank thee." Her reaction is rather one of resentment: "ils m'avont tout pris, morceau par morceau" (p. 97). ("They've taken everything away from me, piece by piece.") But it is not merely the contrast between the two Evangélines, the legend and the reality, that the author wants to point out in this scene. The curious remark of the Breton, telling Evangéline to look for her lost Gabriel in Louisiana, is followed by an equally curious exclamation from Evangéline; as the Breton expires, she cries out: "Cyprien!" (p. 94). For the Breton is, symbolically, Cyprien or any other passion, just as Evangéline herself is the symbol of the woman who will forever search out this passion, and their love affair represents Evangéline's love for all men and, by extension, for life.

With the death of the Breton, the play comes to a close. Evangéline mourns the loss of her latest love (she is especially upset that she has to

mourn him with Kleenex), but vows to continue to make a new life for herself in Montréal. The Rabbi decides to leave for Israel, in the hope of finding at least a place to end his wandering. Left on stage are Evangéline and the Stop, the two French Canadian exiles who have nowhere else to go.

The importance of *Evangéline Deusse* within the scope of Antonine Maillet’s work thus becomes clear. The play is, in the first place, an assertion of the universality of the Acadian experience. This universality was undoubtedly present in previous works, especially in *La Sagouine* which enjoyed a remarkable success in Montréal and in Paris, but nowhere is it as explicit as here. Madame Maillet has moved away from the restrictiveness of the ethnic group towards the concept of *la francophonie* which is currently gaining favor among the intellectuals of Québec. Simply put, *la francophonie* rejects French identity on nationalistic, religious or racial grounds and asserts that all people who are French-speaking, be they Québécois or Haitian or Algerian, have a French identity in common. Madame Maillet says of this idea: “la concentration au Québec de la Francophonie d’Amérique du Nord est sans doute déjà commencée... et ça ne me désole pas: surtout que le mot même de Francophonie implique une diversité de cultures et de mentalités.”24 (“The concentration in Québec of *la Francophonie* of North America has undoubtedly already begun... and I’m glad of it, especially since the word *Francophonie* itself implies a diversity of cultures and mentalities.”)

But beyond the universality of her play, Madame Maillet has expressed a message which opens up a new perspective in her inner landscape. As the philosopher Bruno Drolet has observed,25 Antonine Maillet’s work is an attempt to find a definition of the self which takes into account the individual’s reaction to a specific society. Acadia was essential to the definition of the self since it provided both a cultural tradition and a social context within which characters lived and against which they sometimes rebelled. But with *Evangéline Deusse* the notion of place has disappeared, and with it the existentialist dilemma. Evangéline is not, as was *La Sagouine*, a character who spends two and a half hours defining herself on stage. Evangéline’s role is rather that of a witness to the lives of others, just as Longfellow’s Evangeline was a witness to the deportation and exile of the Acadian people. But Evangéline Deusse is also, as her name implies, an evangelist, the bearer of a message. Early in the play, she remarks that her granddaughter accused her of having her future behind herself: “A’ m’a dit que fallit aouère son avenir en arrière de soi pour parler de même et que yelle, elle avait son avenir en avant” (p. 33). (“She said to me that ya gotta have yer future behind ya to

24. Quoted by André Major. op. cit., p. 17.
Far from finding this remark insulting, Evangéline recognizes the essential truth in it. There is a striking parallel between this remark and the following quotation from Jean-Marie Domenach’s essay entitled *Le Retour du tragique*: “Le destin n’est pas en avant de nous mais en arrière. Le situer en avant, c’est forçément se retourner vers l’arrière.”26 (“Our destiny is not in front of us but behind us. By believing it is in front of us we automatically see it behind us.”) What Domenach implies in his essay, and what Madame Maillet expresses through Evangéline Deusse, is the notion that life is a series of actions which take on meaning only when compared with what went on before. Thus, for example, Evangéline’s love for the Breton is important because she had also loved Cyprien; in a more general sense, her continuing to live and to transplant herself at eighty is important because of the numerous deportations of the Acadians. Her future, if not determined by her past, is at least conditioned by it. Her message thus is destined to the three other exiles (and through them to us) and it is this:

Faut point s’en venir instruire les vieux, ni les dorloter, ni surtout leu faire des accrouères... ni les vieux, ni les déportés. Par rapport qu’i’ sont les seuls que je connais qui savont toute sus la vie, parce qu’i’ sont les seuls qui l’avont recommencée plusieurs fois et qu’i’ s’avont rendus jusqu’au boute. (p. 107)

(Now don’t go and try to teach old folks lessons, an’ don’t pamper ’em, and ’specially don’t try and put one over on ’em. ’Cause old folks an’ deported folks is the only people I know what knows everything ’bout life, ’cause they’re the only people who’ve begun their life over and over again, and who’ve already been to the end of their road.)

Whether or not future works by Antonine Maillet will continue in this universalist, philosophical vein remains to be seen. But it is remarkable how, within the space of scarcely twenty years, one Acadian writer has gone through an evolution which in many ways reminds us of the development of Québec literature from the defensive, land-oriented works of the 1920s and 1930s to the aggressive, cosmopolitan works of the 1960s and 1970s. This evolution can only be a good sign, for it removes us from the often stultifying atmosphere of ethnic revivals and reminds us that we are all, in a sense, “Acadian.”

*Colby College*