

Quebec and Us: A Mutation of Identity

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I am standing outside a formerly elegant house that was home to Émile Nelligan in the late 19th century. Ever since arriving in Quebec to study playwriting at the National Theatre School, I have been fascinated by the tale of Nelligan's extraordinary two-year explosion of creativity followed by a life sentence behind the bars of an insane asylum. The debilitating trauma which silenced the 20-year old genius was often blamed on his Anglo/Irish father.

My apartment was not far from the Nelligan home near *Square St-Louis*, which was inhabited at the time by many celebrated Québécois artists, including Michel Tremblay, author of the libretto for André Gagnon's *Nelligan* opera. In Tremblay's interpretation of the story, Nelligan's father David is a perfectly detestable villain (although performed by the eminently likeable Jim Corcoran) who declares, in English: "I don't want this son of mine to destroy everything I have worked hard for all my life. A poet! For God's sake. Why not a murderer? Why not Jack the Ripper?¹" Later in the opera, Nelligan's mother Émilie explains to her husband, en français, why the gods have cursed their family: «Un père anglais. Une mère française. Des enfants forcés à choisir entre le père et la mère. Une famille coupée en deux dès le départ, vouée à l'échec.» Pat Donnelly in her review wrote, "Poets were kings in ancient Ireland

¹ Nelligan: Michel Tremblay, Leméac 1990.

and kings were poets. The idea of an Irish father rejecting his son because he took up poetry does not ring true. And the idea that Nelligan's family was inherently dysfunctional because it was bilingual is nonsense.²

By the time the *Nelligan* opera was produced, I had two small children conceived by «*un père anglais et une mère française*» and was inclined to dismiss the idea of dysfunctional bilingualism as nonsense. I was not sure if Michel Tremblay was attempting to portray the religious conflicts of Nelligan's generation or investing the myth with his own generation's views about linguistic miscegenation.

To get some historical perspective on mixed marriages in Quebec I began exploring 19th century literature. Most novels from the period were *romans du terroir* set in rural locations, but I eventually came across the story of a family which shared many parallels with the Nelligans. The characters were urban, affluent, cultivated and Catholic: the mother Anglophone, the father Francophone. The novel, written by Abbé Lionel Groulx, was entitled *l'Appel de la race*³.

In Tremblay's opera script, David Nelligan and his daughter Eva mostly speak English, while Émilie and Émile mostly speak French. The family is not divided by a language barrier per se but by a deeper failure to communicate. In Groulx's novel, two of the children shape their identity around the English language and culture of their mother. The other son and daughter shape their identity around the French language and culture of their father. This is a problem because the Francophone son is named Wolfred. He may have been named in honour of the *Patriote* leader Dr. Wolfred Nelson, but the name was foreign. To truly answer the call of the race, the young man had to rid himself of every trace of impurity by renouncing Wolfred and assuming the *pure-laine* name of André.

² Review of 20th anniversary production of *Nelligan*, *Montreal Gazette*, 10 March, 2010

³ *L'appel de la race*: Lionel Groulx (pseudonyme: Aloné de Lestres) *L'Action française*, 1922

This gesture can only provide the cathartic climax intended if we share Groulx's conviction that three factors were essential to preserve the French-Canadian nation: language, religion, and race⁴. Young Wolfred was French-speaking and Catholic but his name was foreign. «Mais il serait donc vrai le désordre mental, le dédoublement psychologique des races mêlées! Il se rappelait aussi une parole terrible du Père Fabien, un jour que tous deux discutaient le problème des mariages mixtes... Le premier effet des croisements entre des races différentes est de détruire l'âme de ces races, c'est-à-dire cet ensemble d'idées et de sentiments communs qui font la force des peuples et sans lesquels il n'y a ni nation ni patrie... C'est donc avec raison que tous les peuples arrivés à un haut degré de civilisation ont soigneusement évité de se mêler à des étrangers.⁵»

Nelligan's madness provided a powerful object lesson to support Lionel Groulx's cautionary tale about the consequences of mixing 'races.' However, there was a clear contradiction between the diagnoses in the Nelligan and Groulx cases. Was the root problem the mixing of language or race? This is an important distinction. The Catholic Church of Abbé Groulx's era (1878-1967) decided to take no risks. The best way to maintain the mental and physical health of their flock was to keep it quarantined from foreign influences.

Quebec's old Catholic School system sent foreigners (Jews, Muslims, Chinese, Hindus etc) to the Protestant school system. Greeks were usually Catholic, but Orthodox rather than Roman, so they were sent over to the Protestants. By the time of the Quiet Revolution, old fears about religion and 'race' were being pushed aside. Public policy began to focus on language as the cornerstone of Quebec identity, but during the 1960s and 70s there was a clash of policy and practice within the Catholic school boards. Government bureaucrats wanted non-Anglophones to be educated in French while gatekeepers

⁴ In the early 20th century the term 'race' was used differently than it is today.

⁵ L'appel de la race: Lionel Groulx, chapitre 3, Échec et tristesse

within the schools maintained an unofficial policy of sending non-Catholic students to the Protestant schools.

It is incomprehensible today that immigrants from France should be discouraged from enrolling in French schools, but not so surprising that they should be excluded from Catholic schools if they were atheists or Jewish. Italians were dumbfounded that they, as good Roman Catholics, should be prevented from enrolling in Catholic schools, particularly because they had far more affinity for the French language than English. “Immigrant kids were being rejected as a result of decisions being made at the school level, likely by numerous French school principals. It was not a myth — I know from direct family history that it actually happened during those years, and it happened a lot⁶.”

Bill 101 (1977) ensured that the language of education, from kindergarten to secondary school, would be French for all, with some exceptions for aboriginals and Anglophones. Four decades later, most of us agree that Bill 101 strengthened the French language and promoted social peace; although coercive application of the law sometimes undermined its unifying potential, as did the frequently repeated affirmation that without a rigorously enforced law, immigrants would not choose to learn French. «Rappelons que, jusqu'aux années 1960, 90% des enfants de parents immigrés fréquentaient l'école anglaise.⁷ »

In fact, many allophones had been excluded from the Catholic system. This is not ancient history. It is galling for the victims of a policy of exclusion to be painted as villains, who rejected Quebec and the French language. It is also a distortion of history to accuse the English-speaking community of a conspiracy to turn immigrants against Quebec when in fact the Protestant school system was simply easier to enter. Roman Catholicism had a centralized bureaucracy which could rigorously enforce doctrine among its members. Protestantism was a religion of protest, fragmentation, and fierce

⁶ Sabino Grassi; Montreal Gazette, 20 February, 2014

⁷ Pierre Serré; Quelle Communauté Anglo-Québécoise?, L'Action Nationale, Mars-Avril 2013

independence. Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Baptists, Methodists and other denominations disagreed on so many points of doctrine that they could only share a school system by striving for neutrality and tolerance. The old Protestant school system put into practice many of the Quiet Revolution's goals of creating an inclusive, 'secular' society.

Bill 101 shifted the debate in Quebec away from religion to language. French was legislated as the only official language, which was traumatic for many mother-tongue Anglos and anglicized allophones. In the decades after the FLQ and the election of the Parti Québécois, 350,000 of them left Quebec.

I am standing outside a house where Émile Nelligan lived with his father, David, and his mother, Émilie. A group of teenagers passes. They are speaking French then, suddenly, like a whirling flock of birds, they switch to English. Lionel Groulx would be shocked. A number of modern demographers and political scientists would agree with him. Few Anglos would be shocked. Since Bill 101, at least 75% of Quebec's English-speakers have learned French. Not because they had to, but because ancestral fears about mixing languages came to appear ridiculous. A second language provides numerous benefits: expanded cultural references, greater employment prospects, increased romantic opportunities, and delayed onset of dementia!

A remarkable number of the romantic relationships of Anglophones in Québec (35 - 45%) are with Francophones. This is partly romance and partly survival strategy, and a brazen defiance of old fears and prejudices. Mixed marriages were rare in Nelligan's day and it was easy to misdiagnose the cause of his psychiatric problems. The large number of 'mixed' children born since the 1970s has conclusively proved that the benefits exceed the disadvantages. Whatever the actual cause of Nelligan's mental illness, his bilingualism made it possible for him to be equally at home reading the latest French,

British and American poetry. His linguistic duality was a significant factor in making him a powerful, original poet.

I have spent the last three years writing a novel about a musician from Australia who comes to Quebec looking for Jack Kerouac, whose parents suffered the unintended consequences of the Catholic Church's plan to 'reconquer' Quebec by giving birth to large families. The policy was known as *La Revanche des berceaux*. «Espérons qu'il en sera ainsi et que, pour continuer les gloires de nos berceaux et de leurs revanches, nous allons maintenir, totale, agissante, sans alliage, pure, cette grande force religieuse et nationale: notre fécondité.⁸» The Bishops miscalculated the parallel need for an exponential increase in land and food. By the 1840s rural Québec was so badly overpopulated that a wave of 500,000 starving farmers began to pour into the US.

The first generations of francophone families in New England took great pride in retaining the French language, the Roman Catholic religion, and their traditional values for almost a century, from the 1840s until the 1930s. "*La survivance* depended on the stubborn preservation, at all costs, of *famille, foi, et langue*. French-American communities created enclaves where no English needed to be spoken. They had their own churches, parish schools, social clubs and funeral parlors.⁹" The price of refusing to adopt the American culture or associate with other immigrants was alienation.

Jack Kerouac's generation of Franco-Americans realized that the isolationist policy of *la survivance* had failed. Kerouac decided to write in English and went on to become the greatest American author of his generation. He has been criticized in Quebec for abandoning his mother tongue. This is not true. Jack regularly spoke French at home, but he understood that minorities have only two choices: to pack up and leave, or to make peace with the majority. In this he is a role model for Quebec's English-speaking community, and its artists.

⁸ Louis Lalonde S J, *La Revanche des berceaux, L'Action Française, 1917*

⁹ Joyce Johnson, *The Voice is All*, Viking, 2012