The Tale of a Narrative: Antonine Maillet's *Don l'Orignal*

by Barbara Thompson Godard

"Le monologue est la forme la plus ancienne et la plus nouvelle du théâtre québecois. . . . Il se situe à la fois en marge (au cabaret, dans les boites) et au coeur de notre théâtre,"(1)writes Laurent Mailhot. This mode of representation has its roots in an especially rich oral narrative tradition that is also the source of tales by Ferron, Thériault, Carrier and, now we may add, by Maillet. Paraphrasing Mailhot, the tale is the most venerable and the newest form of fiction in French-speaking Canada, a paradox I should like to explore in Antonine Maillet's Don l'Orignal.

This novel shares its sophisticated reflexive form with prominent eighteenth-century and contemporary works that question the origins and function of narrative. Don l'Orignal celebrates unbookishness: its self-conscious analysis of narrative focusses on the question of an "Acadian literature" where moribund conventions of the European literary tradition would be regenerated by the living vitality of a native folk tradition based on oral narrative. This folk tradition provides a rhetoric and vocabulary of comedy, a cast of characters and the element of the marvellous that engenders romance. In juxtaposing classical form and vital language, Maillet insists that discovering an ancestral community should liberate rather than enslave a present generation.

In 1971, Maillet published a thesis on Rabelais et les traditions populaires en Acadie(2)wherein she showed how the mediaeval traditions on which Rabelais drew for his celebrated works were alive and flourishing in the folklore of Acadia. As if to demonstrate the reality of the Phoenix, Maillet published in the same year La Sagouine(3) (a monologue or a récit? asks Mailhot)(4)and a year later Don l'Orignal, narratives heavily dependent on her folklore research. Maillet's attempts to develop an artistic language out of the real landscape in which she lives lead her to the folktale, whose very art is "the art of playing with the masks of words."(5) In company with her contemporaries, Maillet's major task becomes the exploration of language for the purpose of freeing the imagination from representational strictures and affirming the compatibility of spiritual and political goals. The continual exploration of the French language in all its vital aspects and Acadian specificity is a constant of Maillet's style. Her linguistic sense seeks out the most vital form of language. Her words, expressions, inflexions are derived from speech, not books. Yet paradoxically, her writing is an attempt to give them form. Like Jacques Ferron, Maillet says: "I am the last of an oral tradition and the first of its written transposition."(6)

In Maillet's novel the multivalent narrative perspective and accumulative plot reveal the modernist ethos, though their origins lie in the oral tale. Modernism, whether of the "early symbolist variety" or a more recent, historically based "postmodernism," attacks mimesis. Paradoxical though it may seem, one of the characteristics of the modernist movement in Canada, whether in Laurence's The Diviners, Aquin's Prochain épisode or Don l'Orignal is the search for new narrative forms in an ancient oral tradition. These works juxtapose the artifice of verisimilitude to the chaotic vitality of history, thus questioning the ability of literature to give form to reality. Its artifices are accentuated through the presence of a highly visible and unreliable narrator and the abandonment of realism's linear plot. In Don l'Orignal folk traditions have the appearance of history and history gains the heightened grandeur of legend. The fact that both history and folk tradition are possible explanations of facts deters us from dismissing either one. Maillet's characteristic structural device of multiple choices leads us to a wider world of multivalent narrative larger than the partial truths of either the marvellous or the world of fact offered therein.

Fundamental to the modernist movement are its linguistic preoccupations. Disjuncted from feeling, language in Modernism took over its own space, formed an opaque substance dwelling outside the characters who ostensibly

mouth it to become itself the subject in a plot. With its emphasis on transmission, the tale does not create heroes but limits itself to propagating the art of speaking and telling.(7) Most common here is a style of "written speech" which, according to Roland Barthes,(8)is one of the more extreme examples of modernist "zero degree writing," writing which is the negation of itself, silence, absence.

Classical language reflected a stable world; however, beginning with Flaubert, language became narcissistic, self-reflexive. Mallarmé with his phrase "to speak has no connection with the reality of things," "murdered" language. Later Wittgenstein described the nature of linguistic truth as tautological ("that which mirrors itself in language, language cannot represent"), and the only subject left for writers was that of their difficult relationship with their medium, language. One facet of this crisis of language has been a turning to symbolism, music or foreign languages to carry the burden of meaning when English or French is no longer sufficient. Maillet's use of Acadian dialect in Don l'Orignal is evidence of her dissatisfaction with literary language. Through her use of the current coin of language, the commonplaces of speech and popular art forms, she has injected new material into literature. There are some indications that Maillet has experienced the crisis of language in yet another way. Her extensive use of pastiche and puns would indicate an attempt at "de-composition." Readers are invited to reflect more deeply on the conventions of literary language.

This dual movement has particular relevance in Canada where both English and French writers have been aware of "translated" language--standard British or American, international French-dominating literature. Dennis Lee has described the problem of language for a minority whose public space is threatened.

> But if we live in space which is radically in question for us, that makes our barest speaking a problem to itself. For voice does issue in part from civil space. And alienation in that space will enter and undercut our writing, make it recoil upon itself, become a problem to itself.
>
> The act of writing "becomes a problem to itself" when it raises a vicious circle, when to write necessarily involves something that seems to make writing impossible. Contradictions in our civil space are one thing that makes this happen, and I am struck by the subtle connections people here have drawn between words and their own problematic public space.(9)

Significantly Lee first made this statement to a group of Quebec writers only too acutely aware of the linguistic alienation of a doubly colonized people.

From the early sixties, a debate on language has animated the Quebec literary world. Its focus has been on "joual," speech that signals linguistic alienation. Those who use it in fiction make thus an implicit comment on literary conventions and show one way to renew them--"Parole" versus "langue."

Roch Carrier, who has chosen to seek out the vital speech of the past to form a new literary language, describes the process in a comment on the origins of La guerre, yes sir.

> En écrivant ce livre, je me suis aperçu que notre littérature demeurait généralement superficielle dans ses thèmes et son ton, comme la littérature d'une communauté tenue à l'écart, alors même que des récits comme ceux de Cartier, de Champlain, du P. Biard, de Marie de l'Incarnation regorgent d'une richesse spontanée qui n'a pratiquement jamais été exploitée. Pour écrire mon roman, j'ai dû me dépouiller de tout ce qu'on m'avait appris pour revenir à la source de personnages d'instinct, de colères, de sentiments profonds. Le sacre, par exemple, dont personnellement je 'use pas, que je n'ai jamais entendu dans ma famille, j'en fais grand usage dans le livre, parce qu'il m'apparaît comme la première affirmation d'une conscience individuelle. La structure syntaxique du blasphème raconte bien notre histoire, le flou de notre expression, le piétinement de la pensée et de la vie. . . .(10)

Maillet has learned from Carrier's example: she uses swearing as a means of individualizing the characters and showing their inventive powers. These are also revealed in their creative malapropisms and unwitting puns on literary classics. Writing from Acadia as a spokesman for its national aspirations,(11)Maillet is even more aware of the colonizing implications of conventional language. Like Carrier she is embarked on the perilous enterprise of creating a vital imaginary country in order for that country to come into existence.

Her Acadian nationality is the first element in Maillet's mistrust of language, but there is a second element nourishing it, namely her sex. Though she has made no feminist pronouncement, in all her fiction--Don l'Orignal, La Sagouine, Mariaagélas and Cordes-de-Bois--Maillet has developed strong female characters who are the effective heads of their societies. Don l'Orignal may be the titular head of Flea Island, but it is La Sagouine who fulfills all the offices she is entitled to in a battle which sets her against the redoubtable Mayoress from the mainland. Epic battles in this fiction, as in Cordes-de-bois, pit women against each other in an inversion of the traditional epic, an implied destruction of masculine conventions.

Contemporary Quebec women's writing also centres the revolt against conventions in language. Following the lead

of French feminists Monique Wittig and Hélène Cixous, Nicole Brossard and Madeleine Gagnon express their existential experience in a subjective manner, attempting to invent their own language, a language of and for women. This enterprise is prompted by their awareness that official languages are the languages of the holders of power in our society, men. Women have not written history and their experience has solidified in the silence of their bodies. The genders of French language make one more acutely aware of its phallocentric nature. For these women, language does not mirror any political, social or psychological reality. There is no continuity between their perceptions and the language used to embody them. Language must be invented anew in a revolutionary act that will overturn all known literary conventions and grammatical laws. Mair Verthuy(12) sums up the means currently employed in this protest against the existing power structure. It "may take the form of asserting the right to speak an already existent language whose use had been forbidden or restricted: . . . it may take the form of linguistic subversion (the extensive use of puns, paratax, etc.), of a repossession of the Word (a woman's body and bodily functions expressed by women), of the desire to create a parallel opposing language (experiments in the invention of new words)." Maillet's extensive use of Acadian dialect, a "restricted language" and the characteristic stylistic features of her prose, the pun and paratax, would suggest she gives implicit assent to the goals of these feminist writers.(13)

The burning question for Maillet is the nature of narrative truth for she would claim her linguistic experiments are elements of the tradition of folk narrative she has inherited, a debt which is largely unconscious.In her thesis only one brief chapter is devoted to the literary technique of tales, a mere two pages being reserved for "l'art du conteur." However, her fiction provides an extended gloss to this section of her thesis.

Emphasis is not on description but on plot in Don l'Orignal, which dissolves into the act of telling, for each character as he is introduced brings his story with him. Don l'Orignal is a collection of sequences. It is about the telling of these stories: its characters (ironically, for they are named after real people in Bouctouche, New Brunswick, as Maillet lists them in her thesis)(14)are word beings who participate in fiction as grammatical beings. "Hommes récits," Todorov has called such figures in The Arabian Nights.(15) Like that earlier collection of tales, Don l'Orignal is circular in form. At its conclusion we reread the phrases of the opening pages about the Fleas setting up their shacks and digging their wells as they begin their society again. Though they have now changed geographical locations with the mainlanders and traded social

classes, these two groups remain opposed to each other. One imagines the struggle between them continuing ad infinitum. Within this circle, the plot develops by the accumulation of stories. Don l'Orignal is a series of intricate Chinese boxes. To speak is to live, we realize, when the narrator's discourse blithely fills in the gaps left in the chronicles and histories (Ch. 31) creating the events ex nihilo, as it were, through his words. Such is the power of the narrative act.

Maillet believes in the power of literature, a fantastic but life-improving literature, yet this makes her all the more aware of the lie that is narrative.(16) Her analysis and judgement of truth and lies, gossip, rumour, memory, private and public story-telling is implicit in her form and themes but occasionally surfaces as in Chapter 31. Here the clash of folk memory and history, of life and literature, favours the former, for the entire narrative is presented to us as a gloss on history that has failed to record the epic events in a nation's development. Instead these have been kept alive in the speech of those descended from the key actors in the events. The narrator assures us in the opening line that he has forgotten how to spell the name of his village and thus has no aptitude for written narrative. His story, he relates in Chapter 31,(17)he has learned from his "paternal grandmother" who "was the daughter-in-law of a third cousin of the god-father of a lateral descendent of the great-grandson of a Flea." Such an oblique relationship with the actors of the story points to the indirectness of the narrative. So many opportunities for creative reinterpretation of the original story have occurred that the truth will never be known.

History is equally fallible. Maillet's openly manipulative narrator alerts our suspicion to the reliability of scientific, objective methods when, in the same chapter, he tells of his use of the auxiliary sciences in seeking to establish the origins of a five-holed button. All along he has known that only the barber wore such buttons! His display of objectivity is self-defeating. We remember then all the other cases where rumour has been studied, cases where there are several contradictory opinions offered by witnesses of an action, as in the narrative of Sam Amateur. (Chs. 8 and 9) Maillet invariably qualifies the testimony of her "highly respectable witnesses" so that we are shown the subtle and important gap between happening and interpretation. The fact that all explanations are possible deters us from dismissing any of them. Where there is a viewer, there is a story; where there is a character, there is a story. They live through narration that brings them into existence. Nevertheless, Maillet gives the final word to the oral narrators. The Epilogue is re-

ported to us purportedly in the very words of the narrator's ancestor who has visited the Fleas. The author insists thus on the collective nature of narrative and on the importance of informal or amateur narratives.

Maillet's method is to place personal acts of narrative imagination within the public chronicle. People tell themselves and each other the truths, half-truths, lies and fantasies by which we all live, while Maillet constantly reminds us of the context of such individual narratives. Storytelling is valued as an activity of the mind and heart. It is freely anecdotal, accumulating local history. Individual biographers stand out within the group but their stories also create a sense of community, for they arise from the flow of conversation picking up naturally (Ch. 6) from other people's remarks and immediate events. One tale thus breeds another, showing that the community recognizes narration as a ritual necessity. So it pours forth its autobiography and the narrator transposes these oral tales into written narrative.

In this role, the narrator is himself an important descendant from the oral tale. Not only does his obvious lying set up the hyperbolic comedy of the transformation of the lilliputian fleas into giants. His omnipresence (defining his role, ordering the complex alternating narratives, imposing the image of a collective narrator) derives from another oral mode where the raconteur must always be aware of the impact of his narrative on his audience. This latter he defines in his first sentence: "along the shores of the country next yours." An opposition is set up between the audience of foreigners and the people of the story. For us, he provides explanations of the nature of life in language we understand. Maillet says that her characters speak their own words in dialect, while she, as narrator, speaks her language which is close to that of the characters but bears the marks of education.(18) This duality of discourse reveals other tensions, that between verisimilitude and the marvellous, for example, which the narrator attempts to blur. As we have noticed, he discusses in detail at strategic points in the narrative (such as the opening and closing of the book and the beginning of chapters) the "real" sources for his story but passes rapidly over the more numerous marvellous adventures. Another fundamental tension is that between the people of the mainland "en haut" and the islanders "en bas," between the rich and the poor. This contrast provokes the drama of the story and reveals the simple and constant opposition fundamental to any popular tale. Certainly this principal operates on many structural levels in Don l'Orignal, in the drama, the mode of representation, the language and the narrator with his audience.

Don l'Orignal is an anatomy of forms of oral narrative. Consequently, the opening chapters of the novel seem confusing to the reader because of the number and variety of narratives. First we have the marvellous tall-tale of the rapid growth of Flea Island risen up from the sea,(19) followed in Chapter 2 by the mainlanders' interpretations of this event as revealed in the conversations of the milliner and the barber who debate the question of the Boer War which they have read about in a library book. They can come to little agreement about the elements of the book, its thesis, language, style or ideas. Here Maillet jokingly explores the imaginative element in the reading of any text and its limitations as a form of truth. Moreover the war in question here is a colonialist one wherein a native population is suppressed by immigrants. At this point in her fiction Maillet is attempting to undermine the position of the cultured mainlanders who oppose the natural "Fleas." Their culture, as we see, leads them to certain erroneous fantasies about Flea Island which are to determine the outcome of the story. The Fleas are first observed through a spyglass ("lorgnette") and a common French expression refers to looking at things through the small end of the "lorgnette," as exaggerating the importance of minor details, indicating a tendency to hyperbole.(20) These, then, are basic attitudes of the mainlanders, attitudes which are going to lead them to attack the Fleas. The ultimate decision to undertake such action is based on the prophetic dream of the Mayor related in Chapter 3. This dream lends imagination to the otherwise limited notion of rational planning. The presence of a fly on the Mayor's forehead has been perceived as a blow from the sling shot of a Flea soldier. On the basis of such an erroneous interpretation of this dream rests her decision to attack the Fleas. The Mayor's deluded fantasies of grandeur (in which she sees herself kindred to Joseph and Joan of Arc in the domain of interpretive skill) and her boasting further undermine the veracity of her viewpoint. Nevertheless, Maillet's narrative is based on the consequences of these misperceptions, dreams and fantasies. The townsfolk are enjoined to share these plans by the terrible presage, the ghost ship, which appears to them in Chapter 7, fulfilling the ritual apparition before great storms. Thus the die is cast. Flea Island will be attacked.

In Chapter 4 we shift to the Flea camp and the domain of the tall-tale. La Sagouine's genealogy is revealed: a fine piece of biography is the narrative of the exploits of Jos à Pit à Boy who shut his stepmother up in a cellar. Moving still in the realm of giants, the narrator refers to the celebrated story of Michel-Archange with Sam Amateur (a story, based on local legends and folk tales)--a narrative delayed until Chapters 8 and 9

when it is related by the bard Pamphile. The stories people tell within the novel tend to be significant in form, feeling and content; in Pamphile's tale of the supernatural we find a model for good story telling and good listening where the teller of this tall-tale finds a proper time and use for lying. In this community, entertainment is essentially narrative. Pamphile's tale, as well as amusing his audience, makes human connections, for he relies on an existing community of interest. The ritual and repetitive nature of his telling is emphasized: that this is the epic tale of battle of a hero from Flea Island (Pumpkin though he may be) underlines the national interest of the telling. Pamphile, through his narrative, works to weld neighbourliness and friendship within the community. These beneficial effects of narrative stand in sharp contrast to the war-like dreams and fantasies of the Mayor and the equally divisive effects of her game of secrets and disclosures (played first with the lighthouse keeper, then with the merchant to keep them in subordinate positions in the battle) which are examples of bad narratives. The Puciade (Fleeiäde) is a microcosm of Don l'Orignal, relating one battle, whereas Maillet recounts the entire history of this people so similar to the Acadians.(21) As well, Pamphile's tale of the exploits of Sam Amateur relies heavily on supernatural lore. The fabulous is his (and Maillet's) milieu.(22) These two chapters are touchstones in the theme of narrative, so important in Don l'Orignal, and illustrate the hopes Maillet has for narrative in a nationalist perspective.

Chapter 5 plunges us into the action of the battle between the mainlanders and the poor from Flea Island but, rather than letting us see what is happening, it is related second-hand in the report of Michel-Archange. This technique of substituting narrative for drama is manifestly modelled on the example of the French classical theatre and the classical epic, for Michel-Archange's story is framed by an epic simile. Here the contrasting elevated European literary tradition and the low oral folk tradition are brought into comic tension. No sooner is the story concluded, than the elevated mode of the epic gives way to a conversational battle where the characters hurl blasphemies, proverbs and nursery rhymes at each other. The greater part of talk in this novel is narrative because it cannot be dramatic. Characters are often too simple to reflect or analyse. Feelings and behaviour have to be explained in stories but because they are created for their tellers by a master of language and psychology, they are powerfully compressed, implying passions and motives. In this passage the compression is extreme, the characters being developed through their imaginative swearing or the type of proverb they speak.

Chapter 6 furnishes us with a longer example of characterization through narrative in Noume's traveller's tale, which relates his fishing expedition to foreign shores and his adventures (mostly with prostitutes). The story thus functions on two levels, as salacious anecdote and as travel narrative. But within Noume's tale is embedded another narrative, the marvellous folktale of the little grey man ("petit bonhomme gris"), the ghost of a headless pirate who guards buried treasure.(23) La Sainte interrupts Noume's narration to suggest that this ghost would have been a help in fighting the other ghost, Sam Amateur, whose story, to be told two chapters later, is thus prepared for. In this way, the spiralling effect of narrative within narrative is compounded. We see how a story is called forth from the conversation of the characters while the community of sympathy between teller and listeners, who both accept the supernatural as factual, is established.(24) This interruption of the preceding story to unfold a second story is similar to the operation of the sentences in Don l'Orignal: complex sentences with numerous subordinate clauses are embedded within each other parallelling the structure of the narrative, a primordial characteristic of folktales.

Maillet controls the series of expanding and conflicting protagonist/narrator viewpoints, giving us the reassuring recognition of the limits of the fictional world, a reassurance essential for comedy. Like Leacock in Sunshine Sketches or Swift in Gulliver's Travels, she provides us not only with the relative clauses that reveal the logic of interruptions but she also indicates to us the limited views of her narrator and characters in the unreliability of the narrator's memory and the deforming view of the mainlanders who look at the Fleas through the "lorgnette."(25) The fleas have been magnified into giants in the tall-tale tradition of Rabelais rather than the heroic one of Le Cid. In an analysis of the characters in the Rabelasian tradition and the giants' tale (type 650 which includes the popular Ti-Jean tales of Acadia and the Anglo-American Paul Bunyan), Maillet(26)comments that they are more openly magnified than literary heroes like Hamlet or Don Quixote who are also fighting for the re-establishment of law and peace.

Maillet has used the Acadian folk tradition in the interpolated stories and characterizations, as well as in the language, technique and structure of narration. Acadian superstitions such as that of the ghost ship, traditional apparition to forecast stormy weather, are included.(27) Several different versions of this story are presented as the mainlanders debate about its significance. Whether one accepts the version of piracy or kidnapping, both involve the witchcraft of a vengeful Indian mother. By offering these dif-

ferent versions for our consideration, Maillet raises doubts in our minds, doubts which are confirmed in the debate about a phantom, "ordinarily a man," according to definition, but never "ordinary," points out the merchant. These plays on words are a salient feature of Maillet's style. Here we have the characteristic skeptical offering of multiple meanings. Each character in Don l'Orignal is a potential story that is the story of his life: every character signifies a new plot. The story serves not only to reiterate an adventure but also to introduce the narrative which a character makes of it. This we see most clearly in the fabulous adventures of Michel-Archange and Sam Amateur, subject to the numerous interpretations of rumour and gossip. The narrator assures us that no factual evidence exists for any of the hypotheses advanced about their supernatural actions. But characters are identified by their varying explanations. La Sainte demonstrates her "saintliness" by accusing Sam of diabolic adventures while Don l'Orignal reveals his preoccupations with leadership in interpreting the actions as "military tactics."

All Maillet's characters are based on folk tradition through their actions or sayings. La Sainte, for instance promises God, in return for the safety of her son, to make a pilgrimage of the stations of the cross, a ritual Maillet says is an important part of Acadian ceremonies.(28) A proverb she has collected in Cape Breton, "il n'y a qu'un poil entre un savant et un fou,"(29)seems to have served as the genesis of the teacher whose saving of Citrouille illustrates the fine line between wisdom and folly. Here we detect Maillet's attempt to revitalize a proverbial language, for the final dramatized creation of the teacher is far more lively than the saying. Citrouille himself, so miraculously resurrected from drowning, so marvellously married by the hermit on the high seas, would seem to owe much to the significant Acadian folk-hero Jean de Calais. This figure illustrates the importance of the sea in Acadian folklore, for Jean in his sea voyage is drowned,then miraculously saved by grateful death. The elements of this tale--the sea, a good deed rewarded, a villain, a beautiful princess, a happy ending--seemed, according to Acadian folklorists, to have especially captivated the imagination of Acadian raconteurs, for they are continually repeated.(30)

In developing her major narrative theme of the contrasts between oral and literary narratives, Maillet has quoted at length in Don l'Orignal without always identifying her sources. When we admit her dependence upon books, we must look at the kinds of authors on whom she depends. Foremost among these is Rabelais, whose model paradoxically affirms the importance of both oral and written narrative. When the Mayor

prophetically dreams of the forthcoming battle, she compares one general to Panurge, the army to his sheep. This explicit reference to Rabelais introduces a number of stylistic parallels with his works, for Maillet has found in this master, a model for the transformation of folklore into literature, and also a model in the art of quoting. Like him, she realizes the comic spirit latent in parodies of the abuse of pedantically quoting. What both are attracted to is words in sacrosanct texts: their humour is catalyzed by the firmly moulded formulas and they are drawn into a game of parodistic inversion.(31) Echoes of Rabelais are all pervasive in Don l'Orignal principally because the French writer provides a model for elevating the oral tradition to great literature. Indeed, Maillet would claim that Rabelais is her immediate ancestor in an Acadian literary tradition, the material he used having remained in embryo for some three centuries in Acadia.

Allusions to other literary works, in Don l'Orignal, are generally tongue-in-cheek and form part of the "battle of the books" in the novel. Maillet's search for a vital language through the paradoxical relationship of literary text and life owes much to the Renaissance humanist tradition with its mocking of scholastic texts and delight in the freshness of the vulgate. Rabelais' model here is instructive, for he has taught her much about the art of misquoting, about the development of extensive plays on proverbs and wise-saws and has fed her penchant for fantastic etymology. It is also significant that Maillet compares her hero Noume to Don Quixote, and so, as author, points out the magnification process indulged in by the protagonist narrator. Cervantes' interest in the alienating effects of literature, in the discrepancy between literature and life, has influenced her. From Cervantes too, Maillet has learned how to draw quotations from books and from proverbs or nursery rhymes, fitting them into a balanced harmony of contrasts. The narrator's literary allusions find their antithetical correspondence in the Fleas' popular expressions and proverbs, for both quotation and proverb are preformed linguistic material. In Don l'Orignal the extensive allusions to books work both to create a universal language of reference, a mythic background for an Acadian literature and, through Maillet's parodying of them, to decompose this discourse in favour of the vitality of the living literature of Acadia.

Throughout Don l'Orignal, too, there is a paradoxical relationship of flesh and word, of "parole" and "langue." The lively images and hyperbole of the Fleas' speech contrasts with the formalized language of the narrator's prose as he seeks through balanced sentences, epithets and catalogues to fit their action into the epic mould. Juxtaposition of different levels of

language is one of the chief comic features of the novel. Literature and life are brought into most eloquent conflict in the debate in Chapter 5 where the narrator introduces and frames the dialogue with a series of balanced phrases:

> So they threw themselves body and soul into an illuminating debate worthy of the most august House of Commons. Hair stood on end, feet beat the ground and fists drew fantastic arabesques in the sky.(32)

Rapidly the succeeding dialogue dissolves into a series of misquoted proverbs and swearing, brought to a conclusion by Don l'Orignal's resounding "godêche de hell!" signifying the Acadian's originality of speech and demonic vitality. Earlier in the same chapter an extended epic simile(33) frames and contrasts Michel-Archange's description of the attempted capture of a keg of molasses. In keeping with the classical tradition, the action is related not dramatized, for it is less important than Michel's way of telling it which creates the comedy of contrasting language so fundamental to Don l'Orignal and its hyperbolic mode of narrative.

Maillet's second aim is to find a viable, vital language for an Acadian literature and her exploration assumes two forms. First, there is the attempt, already briefly described, to adumbrate a universal language from a number of literary models from different ages which have become clichéed forms in the modern world. Maillet seeks to ignite some of the fossilized energy found in these clichés, energy located especially in the Acadians' speech. While far from being the exhaustive analysis of Flaubert's Bouvard et Pécuchet or his Dictionnaire des idées reçues, Don l'Orignal is an inventory of ritual ways of expression partially detached from their original emotional and spiritual meaning. Burdened by the wastes of time, these cultural shards and rubbish of the past create a discordant variety of styles to produce sounds not previously heard in high French Canadian literature. Sensitive to the thinness, inarticulateness and alienation of language, Maillet seeks to disturb the reader's conventional consciousness in other ways and to enter a new realm of aesthetic possibilities. This second development begins with the dislocation of this conventional language and moves to creation with the introduction of Acadianisms into the literary language. That the tale is the literary genre most appropriate for such exploration has been suggested by Jean Marcel.(34) Maillet proposes a mythology as much in the vocabulary, syntax and rhetoric of her work as in the figuration.

It is in Chapter 23 that the problem of language is most clearly addressed, as the cultural insensibility of the community is demonstrated through its reliance on foreign tongues, mindlessly repeated:

> The funeral procession landed on the island reciting and chanting the prayers for the repose of the dead. Since the Flea nation was entirely non-Latin in origin, it was apt to confound ablatives, genitives and accusatives in a way to render the meaning of the requests it addressed to the heavens completely unintelligible to itself and Citrouille. They were vaguely aware of crying something or other from the depths of the abyss: that a watcher somewhere was hoping for Aurora: that someone held his sins before him while another trailed his works after: and that a sacrifice would be made from a holocaust or a helicopter, it wasn't quite clear which one. Dies illa, dies irae, quescat aeternam Domine, R.I.P.(35)

The absurdity of the puns unintentionally made by the characters who replace dawn by the figure of a woman, Aurora, and confound helicopter with holocaust--though the words are far from being homonyms--points to the fact that for the characters "to speak has no connection with the reality of things," though it does for Maillet at this point. Through her puns she destructures this ritual language for us. She also points to a means of refreshing the language through the replacement of outworn formulas with new words drawn from the immediate experience of the characters.

This attempt to revitalize the corpse, language, is dramatized in the Biblical pageant of the Fleas presented at the celebration of Citrouille's resurrection. Here too we observe the manner in which Maillet's native folk heroes are drawn against contrasting heroic values of the old world. In her thesis, Maillet(36) states that one lively aspect of Acadian folklore has been the presentation of Biblical plays in church basements. The Fleas treat episodes from Genesis very freely, thus crystallizing the recreative process at work in their parodying of sacred texts. La Cruche, as prostitute, plays the role of Eve, giving thus a worldly interpretation to the fall of man. No spiritual sins of pride for these people! Similarly, the parallels between crafty, braggart Noume, retiring Citrouille and the brothers Cain and Abel are reinforced, though Abel is brought to life to commemorate Citrouille's revival, thus encapsulating the victory of life over form that this dramatic production significantly represents. Puns and word plays(37) such as malapropisms reveal the gap between ritual language and emotional reality, destructuring the text in preparation for the next step which is the translation of texts into Acadian speech.

Proverbs are another form of ritual, tautological speech into which Maillet injects new life through her juxtaposition, misquotation and misapplication of them. The author-narrator of Don l'Orignal reveals to us the limi-

tations of the characters, whose action is determined by proverbs, through the absurd conclusions that result from their being too-literally applied. For instance, the Flea invasion of the mainland to capture the keg of molasses is effected "in the west, in order to outwit the enemy whose soundest military theory was that the devil always came from the east."(38) Such preparation seems exaggerated when the mere sight of the Fleas sends all the mainlanders into their houses! The succeeding manoeuvres of dividing the army into three whose wandering paths will converge on the keg, confirms the absurdity of the initial insistence on direction, when the armies criss-cross and then mill about anywhere.

Also significant in terms of renewing the language are Maillet's Rabelaisian parodies of sacred texts which link the themes of the narrative and the story of language, for the parodies turn on the translation of literary texts into Acadian dialect. La Sagouine's Jeremiade in Chapter 33 which echoes the language and structure of the prophet's lamentations while transforming their sense is an excellent example of this restructuring process. Her lament places the conflict between mainlanders and islanders in the context of the struggle between Babylon and Jerusalem and hereby inverses the denotative values of their names. For, though the Fleas have been associated with the devil, their homes are now lamented as Jeremiah mourned Jerusalem.(39) In conclusion, La Sagouine threatens the mainlanders with the "bomination of desolation," a malapropism based on two of the most frequently used words in Jeremiah.(40) But the prophet was berating his own people of Israel, predicting this destruction for them should they not mend their ways, while La Sagouine vituperates against the mainlanders. Other misquotations, such as Jeremiah 10:19 "Woe is me for my hurt! my wound is grievous" which becomes "For your wound is as big as the sea,"(41)demonstrate how the sense of the prophecy has been translated into new terms predicting not the downfall, but the final victory of the Fleas, as related in the Epilogue.

Similarly, Citrouille's appropriation of Hamlet's famous monologue, "To be or not to be," is translated into new terms in this context. Hamlet reflects on the existential dilemma and dies, Citrouille debates on the question of death and lives.(42)

> T'kick off, t' be finished with
> every-thin', once 'n fer all.
> Is't better fer a guy from th'
> island t'
> drag out his bitch uva life goin'
> between
> his shack 'n his punt, or t' finish
> it
> all off by sinkin' 'tween them?
> One Citrouille less in th' world.
> T' kick off, t' sink, t' sleep 'n
> perhaps
> t' dream.(43)

Shakespeare's elevated language is subverted here in Citrouille's low level speech, revealing thus the thrust of Maillet's story of language which, like the Fleas, is struggling towards life. They overturn or walk around ritual forms of speech and clichés breathing new life into old formulae.

In this introduction of Acadian language, hitherto spoken, into the elevated structure of literary discourse we discover the ultimate importance of Don l'Orignal. Maillet becomes the last of an oral tradition and the first of a written one, bridging the gap with the literary ancestors of Acadia in sixteenth and seventeenth-century France. A more detailed examination of her use of dialect would lead us to various Acadian glossaries. There one learns about the alternate verb forms employed in Acadian syntax of which Maillet has made only sparing use, retaining the unusual plural form--the royal we as in "j'avions"(44)or "j'enterrons"--to emphasize the collective spirit of the Fleas (and Acadians). We could enumerate the archaisms in the Flea islanders'speech that have a richness of imagery not found in modern, thinner, less articulate speech. Just listen to La Sagouine thunder at her hypocritical neighbours: "rats d'église, mangeux de balustre, saintes nitouches, fripeux de bénitier." Add to these words like "hucher" for "crier" (shout), or "forbir" for "frotter" (clean up), "l'échine" instead of "dos" (back), "jongler" for "réfléchir, songer" (dream), and the printed page is significantly transformed in its aspect to change the reader's perceptions of language. Stopping to ponder over the lexical references of these unfamiliar words, the reader slows his pace. Words come more rapidly than sense and the reader is thus obliged to involve himself actively in the creative process.

These archaisms give Don l'Orignal its characteristic note, popular and learned at the same time, and are thus an elegant means of recalling the dual origins of tales. Moreover they aid the dislocation from time and space necessary for the genre. For Maillet, though, they are evidence of the continuity of the human imagination and provide that essential link in the literary tradition she is establishing--a tradition whose predecessors are in the Renaissance but whose ancestors are in the even more ancient and more modern oral tradition. Such a feeling of continuity is essential in the exploration of the vital aspects of language that is Maillet's constant concern. A country invents itself in its words and its spelling. Maillet is both lexicographer and toponymist. Despite the frequency of quotation in Don l'Orignal, Maillet's words, expressions and inflexions come not from books but from life. What dictionary could contain these expressions when she is the first in a literary tradition? Maillet has listened to the old people

telling their tales and taken note.

Language is renewed also through neologisms unique to the geographical location. Terms such as "poire-âcre" (choke-cherry) and "doré" (dory)(45) describe vegetation and boats of Acadia. In other cases, the language has bent under the influence of Indian or English words. "Mashkoui"(46)is a Micmac word for soft birch bark: "frolic" is borrowed from English but its meaning is transformed to "bee."(47) This would suggest that Acadians, like the Fleas, associate these events less with the work undertaken than with the amusement that follows. Another instance where the connotative value of the word has been transformed is "sawesse," a corruption of the English "souwester." For the Acadian, this word refers to any hat with a peaked brim worn backwards with the brim over the neck. Hats are worn this way by farmers on rainy days or by lumberjacks in the winter woods to keep the moisture off their necks.(48) Each word thus has its story too within the longer narrative which attempts to monumentalize this language that has kept its natal freshness but is in the process of being structured.

Since Maillet is involved in the genesis of a literary world, she has only a limited interest in destructuring language. The techniques she uses of disturbing our perception of language help to renew it. Her puns, as we have seen, subvert ritual forms of speech or clichés and replace them with the vitality of Acadian speech. Likewise her style, with its densely embedded clauses, resembles the paratax. Jean Marcel states,(49)that this rhetorical device of linking statements without conjunction, without syntactical bonds, is the dominant a-syntactical trait in the primitive construction of sentences and is characteristic of languages in the process of formation or, in literature, of the epic and the tale, strongly marked by the traits of oral style. Maillet rarely omits the conjunctions, but the length of her sentences, the number of actions contained in each, is frequently confusing to the reader in the way of the paratax. Examples abound, but one might examine the first sentence where one is plunged into the middle of an action (in media res is the epic formula) through the complexity of the period.

> On the shores of the country right next to yours where I still live, in front of a village whose name I've forgotten how to spell, there arose one fine morning a sort of yellow blob that looked just like a whale.(50)

Here syntactic play has replaced the ritual entry of the oral tale. In other cases, wasting no time with qualifications and reservations the oral style piles action upon action.

> However, oceans that give birth to islands don't take them back until they've done their time and fulfilled their destiny, gambolling

> and splashing about and spattering nearby shores too if they don't watch out. This is what the island of hay did. Its neighbours had underestimated how deep and solid it was.(51) Thus the people of the mainland turned their eyes and attention way from the island, too eager to plant, hoe, pick, gather, produce and market to concern themselves with a tiny little island of hay. And so it was able to shoot up and flower in peace, ignored and forsaken by all continents.(52)

Such complexity and condensation forces the reader to slow down and examine the text carefully. These changes in tempo contribute to our sense of disorientation and the renewal of our perception of language.

Maillet's sensitivity to language is derived from her triple alienation as woman, Acadian and French Canadian. While she has made us aware of the linguistic uniqueness of the alienated, above all she has striven to communicate. Her ideal of the good narrator is Pamphile, the bard whose stories forge communal and national bonds between people. Don l'Orignal is the "Puciade" of the Acadians.

NOTES

1. Laurent Mailhot, "Le monologue québécois," Canadian Literature, 58 (Autumn, 1973), p. 26.

2. Antonine Maillet, Rabelais et les traditions populaires en Acadie (Montreal, 1971), hereafter referred to as Rabelais.

3. Antonine Maillet, La Sagouine (Montreal, 1971).

4. Mailhot, p. 27.

5. Jean Marcel, Jacques Ferron, malgré lui (Montreal, 1970), p. 101. "L'art du conte c'est l'art de jouer du masque avec les mots, art très ancien et qui tient son prestige de ce qu'il a été essentiellement populaire."

6. Jacques Ferron, La barre du jour, 2, no. 4 (1967), p. 26. "Je suis le dernier d'une tradition orale et le premier d'une transposition écrite." See note 24 for Maillet's wording.

7. Marcel, p. 59.

8. Roland Barthes, Le degré zéro de l'écriture (Paris, 1964), p. 12.

9. Dennis Lee, "Country Cadence Silence," Open Letter, Ser. II, No. 6 (Fall, 1973), p. 37.

10. Roch Carrier, La Presse, 2 mars, 1968, p. 25, quoted in Renald Bérubé, "La guerre, yes sir! de Roch Carrier: humour noir et langage vert," Voix et images du pays III (1970), p. 146.

11. In an interview with André Major, Maillet at first rejects Major's assertion that she is a "porte-parole" of Acadia, then admits that she is an "auteur engagé" in that the image she gives of Acadia involves her personally, pp. 17:18.

12. Mair Verthuy and Jeanne Maranda: "Quebec Feminist Writing," Emergency Librarian, Vol. 5, no. 1 (September/October, 1977), p. 3.

13. One may question the exclusiveness of these techniques to women's writing. Ferron, for instance, makes extensive use of the paratax and the pun while Kroetsch in The Studhorse Man develops much of his argument for a western literature on the pun "Poseidon, posse, pussy, poesie." Nevertheless, if one considers this sensitivity to language and desire to renew it as constituting a fundamental characteristic of minority literatures and accept Elaine Showalter's contention [in A Literature of Their Own, (Princeton, 1977), p. 10] that women's writing follows the pattern of evolution of other minority literatures, then it would seem likely that women who were doubly a minority, as is Maillet, and thus doubly sensitive should be in the forefront of the linguistic renewal of their national literatures.

14. Maillet, Rabelais, p. 125.

15. Tvestan Todorov, "Hommes récits," Poétique de la prose (Paris, 1971), p. 78. "Narrative men" is the English translation.

16. Maillet calls artistic creation "a lie" in "Interview" with André Major, Ecrits du Canada Français, no. 36 (1973), p. 11.

17. The title of this chapter is: WHEREIN THE AUTHOR OF THIS SO TRUE, SO VERITABLE, SO VERACIOUS TALE REVEALS HIS SOURCES AND EXPOSES HIS METHODS IN ORDER TO PROVE HIS COMPLETE OBJECTIVITY. This echoes a formula from Rabelais designed to draw attention to the tell-tale exaggeration of an anecdote. The phrase in question is "ce tant vrai, tant véritable et tant véridique récit." Maillet, Rabelais, p. 183.

18. Maillet Interview, p. 20.

19. We have already briefly mentioned ghost-tales and local legends as types included in this anatomy of narrative, but the oral tradition has played an even more significant role in the composition of Don l'Orignal. The liar's tale or tall tale has been an important feature of North-American folklore and Maillet has identified its importance in Acadia, (Rabelais, p. 36). The extremely rapid growth of Flea Island belongs in this tradition. Daniel Hoffman (Form and Fable in American Fiction, New York, 1973, p. 18-19) has suggested that such recurrent fables of a land alive with marvels and gigantic in fertility which at first glance seem like local "boosterisms" reflect cultural attitudes to nature. "The myth which these preposterous deadpan exaggerations project is that of the Earthly Paradise, the Land of Cockaigne, the prelapsarian Eden in the New World." Maillet tells us that Cocaigne is the name of a New Brunswick village near her native Bouctouche, setting of Don l'Orignal. Moreover, she suggests that the characteristics of Rabelais' giants--the story-telling Grandgousier, the gigantically strong Gargantua, the strength elevated to art of Pantagruel and the craft of Panurge--are the same as those

of our "Boy à Polyte, Noume, Michel-Archange," all real people of Bouctouche. Through the magnifying lens of the spyglass, real people are developed into literary heroes on the folk model.

20. Le Petit Robert, p. 1008. "Lorgnette."

21. The story of the poor young man (Citrouille) and the rich girl (Adeline) served as the basis for an earlier realistic tale by Maillet in the play Les Crasseux (1968). These two works together, Maillet replies to Major's question, relate the Dispersion of the Acadians in a social form in the conflict of rich and poor, a form that dramatizes also the situation in Acadia today. (Interview, Major, p. 21).

22. In an analysis of Acadian folklore, Charlotte Cormier and Nancy Schmitz comment on the surprising richness of marvellous tales in the present day repertory of Acadian raconteurs. As well humorous anecdotes constitute a large part of the folklore corpus. "Contes acadiens," Revue de l'Université de Moncton, 8 (1975), pp. 6-7.

23. Maillet, Rabelais, p. 46.

24. These interrelated narratives resemble the "compiled stories" or mosaics or or "collages" of other contemporary writers less obviously indebted to the oral tradition such as Ray Smith and Clark Blaise.

25. If this distortion were not clear in the beginning, it is by the end (p. 140 - Ch. 34). "The poor keeper was making too much of it. He didn't need all his artillery to discover the new vision offered to his eyes and confused mind. For the scene that suddenly caught at his throat was taking place right at his feet, at the base of the lighthouse, at a distance attainable with the naked eye."

26. Maillet, Rabelais, p. 116 and 120.

27. Maillet, Don l'Orignal (Montreal, 1972). The Tale of Don l'Orignal (Toronto: Clarke Irwin: 1978). trans. B. Godard, Chapter 7.

28. Maillet, Rabelais, pp. 78-9.

29. Ibid., p. 81.

30. Charlotte Cormier and Nancy Schmitz, "Contes acadiens," pp. 6-7.

31. Herman Meyer, The poetics of quotation in the European novel (Princeton, 1968), pp. 35, 40.

32. Maillet, Don l'Orignal, p. 25, Ch. 5. "Alors on se jeta corps perdu et le cerveau échauffé dans un lumineux débat, digne de la plus auguste chambre de communes. Les cheveux se hérissaient, les pieds frappaient le sol, et les poigns dessinaient dans le ciel des fantastiques arabesques."

33. Ibid., p. 27. Ch. 5. "On this day it (the sky) was all pocked with tiny clouds which looked like many ancient gods come there to applaud the entertaining spectacle about to unfold below. (. . .) "That's how she be then. . . !"

34. Marcel, p. 101.

35. Ibid., p. 95, Ch. 23.

36. Maillet, Rabelais, pp. 113-4.

37. Maillet, Don l'Orignal, p. 96, Ch. 23 for example.

"Citrouille's returned!"
"Resurrected the revenant!"
"The ghost's resuscitated!"
"Returned, re-entered, revived, recaptured!"
"Rrrrrr! rrrrr!"
"Purrrrr. . .rrrrr. . .rrrr, Citrouille!"
"Resuscitated, recitrouilled!"

38. Ibid., p. 52, Ch. 12.

39. Jeremiah 4:19 - 31.

40. Jeremiah 8:12.

41. Jeremiah 6:10. "To whom shall I speak and give warning that they may hear you" is echoed in p. 136, Ch. 33. "To whom shall I compare you little island."

42. Maillet, Don l'Orignal, Ch. 18.

43. "Crever ou pas crever, c'est là la grosse affaire. Un gars de l'île est-y mieux de traîner sa salope de vie entre sa cabane et son chaland ou d'en finir en se laissant couler entre les deux?"

44. Ibid., pp. 23 (Ch. 5) and 76.

45. See Pascal Poirier, Le Parler Franco-acadien et ses origines (Quebec, 1928) and Geneviève Massignon, Les parlers français d'Acadie, 2 vols. (Paris: 1962).

46. Ibid., p. 67, Ch. 16.

47. Maillet, Rabelais, p. 71.

48. Ibid., p. 76, Ch. 18. Thanks to Anna Arsenault for this explanation.

49. Marcel, p. 116.

50. Maillet, Don l'Orignal, Ch. 1. "Le long des côtes du pays que j'habite encore et qui se situe juste à côté du vôtre, avait surgi un bon matin, en pleine mer, en face d'un village dont l'orthographe ne m'est plus en mémoire, une espèce de tache jaune et qui avait toute l'apparence d'une baleine d'or.

51. Ibid., p. 10, Ch. 1. "Cependant les océans qui accouchent d'îles ne les reprennent pas que celles-ci n'aient fait leur temps, accompli leur destinée, s'ébattant et s'ébrouant jusqu'à éclabousser les rives par trop proches et qui ne prennent assez tôt leurs précautions. Il en fut ainsi de l'île de foin dont les voisins avaient mal estimé la profondeur et la solidité."

52. "Les gens de la terre ferme donc avaient détourné leurs yeux et leur attention de l'île, trop empressés à planter, sarcler, cueillir, vendanger, produire et marchander, pour s'occuper en plus d'une mince petite île de foin. C'est ainsi que l'île put germer et fleurir en paix, ignorée et abandonée de tous les continents."