

The Eternal Return to What?
Religious and Queer Influences on Normand Chaurette's Plays

[NOTE: Wherever possible, I have used English translations of the plays and scholarly articles under consideration. Where no official translation is available, I have quoted in French and provided my own, very rough translations as footnotes.]

The plays of Normand Chaurette combine ontological uncertainty with a ritualistic sense of repetition. In her interview with Chaurette for *Nuit blanche*, Carrie Loffree writes that "*Les sociétés occidentales font reposer leur vision du monde sur un certain nombre de prémisses. Nous croyons, entre autres, que le temps se déroule de façon chronologique, que l'espace est statique, et que la réalité objective est à l'opposé de fantaisie.*"¹ (Loffree, 61). The result of this is a queering of the most basic certainties of Western thought. In *Provincetown Playhouse, July 1919*, the 38-year old Charles Charles attempts to explain the mystery behind his nineteen years in a mental institution, but the facts he reveals are thrown into question by his identification as a madman. The scientists in *Fragments of a Farewell Letter Read by Geologists* attempt to figure out how one of their colleagues died during a failed study in Cambodia, but cannot even agree on such simple realities as the weather, much less the meaning of a water-damaged note left by the deceased. Two men claiming to be Giuseppe Verdi write *Don Carlo* in *All the Verdis in Venice*, but it is never clear who is the real Verdi, who may already be in Cairo preparing the premiere of *Aida*. The four women comprising the cast of *The Concise Köchel* recreate past traumas surrounding their son without ever revealing which of the four is his biological mother or even if the four women on stage are the four women who originally experienced the events depicted.

All of this uncertainty is couched in an air of ritual as characters repeat dialogue and re-enact events numerous times. In her master's thesis on Chaurette, Geneviève Villemure describes his style as "...constitué de multiples reprises de thèmes, de redites de paroles de personnages et d'événements passés..."² (Villemure 12).

¹ "Western society rests its vision of the world on a certain number of premises. We believe, among other things, that time unfolds chronologically, that space is static and that objective reality is the opposite of fantasy."

² "...constituted of multiple repetitions of themes, repetitions of words, of characters, and of past events..."

In Charles Charles's imagination the premiere performance of his play *The Sacrificial Slaying of Beauty* is repeated as he corrects the staging in his mind and describes dealing with a latecomer. The scientists in *Fragments of a Farewell Letter Read by Geologists* and the grieving mothers of *Stabat Mater II* echo each other's word choices and phraseology, creating a musical effect.

The distinctive elements of Chaurrette's plays, which make them resistant to simple interpretation, have inspired studies from a variety of approaches—Freudian, postmodern, linguistic, etc. It is the purpose of this paper to apply an additional lens, one informed by religious studies and primarily emphasizing Mircea Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane*, to three of Chaurrette's plays: *Rêve d'une nuit en hôpital* (1980), *Fragments of a Farewell Letter Read by Geologists* (1998), and *Stabat Mater II* (1999). The goal here is not to supersede other approaches to his work, but rather to provide an additional tool with which to unpack the plays and the ways they queer basic Western assumptions about time, place, character and meaning.

That references to Catholicism are ubiquitous in several of his plays is hardly surprising given that Chaurrette was born in Montreal in 1954. For the first six years of his life, he lived in a province in which the Church dominated secular life through its control of education, social services, and health care. Although Jean Lesage's newly elected Liberal government took over most of those areas starting in 1960, the transition was gradual, keeping the church as a powerful force through most of Chaurrette's formative years. With Vatican Council II (1962=65), the Church maintained its influence but with a change in focus from secular power to creating "a truly Christian society, one benefiting each and every citizen" (Warren 88f)

The repetition in almost all of Chaurrette's plays can be seen as a reflection of the use of repetition in the mass and liturgical music. Beyond that, the Church is a part of the Quebec-set *Rêve d'une nuit d'hôpital* and the fictional Manustro, the setting for *Stabat Mater II*. Religious fantasies inform the madness of Joa, the central character in *Fêtes d'Automne*. Where the characters do not have a strong connection to Catholicism, many maintain a yearning for meaning beyond objective reality. Charles Charles in *Provincetown Playhouse, July 1919* has produced a play attempting to re-capture the truths of ancient Greek ritual

theatre, while the final two witnesses in *Fragments of a Farewell Letter Read by Geologists* suggest spiritual means of understanding an event the scientists at the inquest cannot explain adequately.

Chaurette's first major work, *Rêve d'une nuit d'hôpital*, debuted on radio in 1976 and was transferred to the stage in 1980. The work is inspired by the life of French-Canadian poet Émile Nelligan, but it is not a biography. Rather, as Chaurette has said, "*En douze tableaux, j'ai voulu cerner quelque chose qui soit près du rêve, avec tout ce qu'il comporte de 'logique,' et aussi ce frisson qui l'accompagne, instantané, à la fois subtil et douloureux.*"³ (Chaurette, "Introduction" 21) The twelve scenes mix the various periods in Nelligan's life, leaping from the child growing up in eastern Quebec to the 12-year-old attending the St. Olier School to the 53-year-old Nelligan, now committed to the mental institution at Saint-Jean-de-Dieu, on July 11, 1932, the day he heard one of his poems read over the radio.

Religious elements recur throughout the script. The play is set in Nelligan's mind between the tenth and eleventh rings of the Angelus, the noontime Catholic devotion commemorating the tidings brought to Mary by the angel, a text quoted in Nelligan's hallucination in Scene 12 by the two nuns attending him at the hospital. In that hallucination, he also envisions the nuns, La Petite and La Grande, as angels visiting the Earth and soon to return to heaven. Nelligan is himself described as an angel by his sisters in Scene 6, set in his childhood home in Cacouna:

GERTRUDE: *Il ne se nourrit que de l'air, comme les anges.*

Rires des soeurs.

EVA: *Un ange!*

GERTRUDE: *Un ange avec des ailes, du rouge sur les lèvres, et les mains blanches, sans lignes!* (Chaurette, RNH 58)

At other times, La Petite describes him in more godlike terms:

³ "In twelve tableaux, I wanted to identify something that was close to a dream, with everything that comprises 'logic,' and also the thrill that accompanies it, a snapshot, at once subtle and sorrowful."

⁴ GERTRUDE: He lives on only air, like the angels.

The sisters laugh.

EVA: An angel!

GERTRUDE: An angel with wings, with red on his lips, and white hands, with no lines!

LA PETITE: *Notre porte-bonheur a inventé la lumière!*⁵ (Chaurette 38)

.....
LA PETITE: *Son amour ne connaît pas des frontières...*⁶ (Chaurette 48)

His childhood home is described by Jean Cléo Godin as "*un bref instant au 'paradis' de Cacouna où, selon l'expression du mystérieux invité, "on se croirait parmi les anges'.*"⁷(Godin 14)

The scene by Godin, Scene 6, is central to a spiritual understanding of the play. By turning his childhood home into a paradise in his mind, Nelligan is fantasizing the eternal return, a myth described by Eliade as "*the desire to live in a pure and holy cosmos, as it was in the beginning, when it came fresh from the Creator's hands.*" (Eliade 65, emphasis his) In Nelligan's mind, the paradise of Cacouna is juxtaposed with his more hellish existence in the hospital and the Olier School. The hospital is a place of unremitting heat and light. Describing his visit to Nelligan's room, The Teacher says:

*Il a la fièvre, et juste de l'autre côté du mur, on a installé une fournaise géante qui dégage une chaleur d'enfer...On lui a donné une chambre qui donne sur le sud. Avec les midis qu'on a, imaginez le soleil en pleine fenêtre; on entre là et on doit plisser les yeux tellement la lumière est aveuglante.*⁸ (Chaurette 77)

The school's hellish nature is underlined in a statement of Nelligan's referenced by the teacher: "*Lanctot m'a dit que lorsque je vous avais raconté ce rêve, ce rêve que vous étiez en enfer, c'est vrai que vous avez répondu que je n'avais pas rêvé?*"⁹ (Chaurette 62) In addition, the school is the place where Nelligan's punishment (for reading forbidden books by Rimbaud, Baudelaire, and others) is plotted out by the Teacher and the Rector:

LE RECTEUR: *Vos punitions sont effrayantes.*

⁵ LA PETITE: Our lucky charm has invented light!

⁶ LA PETITE: His love knows no borders...

⁷ "a brief instant in the 'paradise' of Cacouna where, in the terms of the mysterious guest, 'you'd think we were with the angels'."

⁸ "He has a fever, just on the other side of the wall, they've put in a giant furnace that sends out a hellish heat...They gave him a room with southern exposure. When it's noon, you can imagine the sun blazing through his window: it's so blinding you have squint when you go in there."

⁹ "Lanctot told me that when I told you about my dream, my dream about your being in Hell, is it true what you replied, that I wasn't dreaming?"

L'INSTITUTEUR: *Qu'on lui apporte une dizaine de plateaux chargés et qu'on le force à manger.*

LE RECTEUR: *Nous ne pouvons pas le rendre malade...*

L'INSTITUTEUR: *Quoi alors? L'ébouillanter? Lui tirer les cheveux?*

LE RECTEUR: *Qu'on fasse un feu et qu'on brûle plusieurs livres devant lui!*

L'INSTITUTEUR: *Vous iriez jusque-là?*

LE RECTEUR: *Il verrait enfin ce que c'est que l'enfer.*¹⁰ (Chaurette 80)

In response, Nelligan attempts to transform those hellish places into his paradise. He tries to bring something of Cacouna to the hospital by inviting his favorite sister, Eva, to join him at Saint-Jean-de-Dieu, lying that ". . . *tout me rapelle Cacouna*"¹¹ (Chaurette 75) 1. He incorporates The Teacher into his fantasies as a visitor bringing news of the praise his poetry has earned in the outside world.

As mentioned earlier, Nelligan envisions the two nuns as angels. When they discuss their impending return to heaven, La Grande asks if he'd like to accompany them. That reflects another attempt to return to paradise, as do some of the poems incorporated within the text. In Scene 11, Chaurette quotes from "*Rêve d'une nuit d'hôpital*," the poem from which he takes the play's title. In the poem, Nelligan envisions a concert given by St. Cecilia at the hospital, transforming the hellish space into a paradise. He concludes with a wish for another visit and a possible escape:

*Et je veux retourner au prochain récital
Qu'elle me doit donner au pays planétaire,
Quand les anges m'auront sorti de l'hôpital.*¹² (Chaurette 88)

That same dream of escape runs through "*Clair de Lune Intellectuel*," the poem cited most frequently by Chaurette:

¹⁰ THE RECTOR: Your punishments are frightening.

THE TEACHER: We'll bring him heaping plates and force him to eat.

THE RECTOR: We can't make him sick...

THE TEACHER: What then? Scald him? Pull out his hair?

THE RECTOR: We'll make a fire and burn some books in front of him!

THE TEACHER: You'd go that far?

THE RECTOR: We'd show him what Hell is like.

¹¹ " , , , everything here reminds me of Cacouna."

¹² "And I want to return for the next soirée

"That she will give in her planetary land

"When angels tear me from this infirmary." (Trans. Cogswell)

*Ma pensée est couleur de lumières lointaines
Du fond de quelque crypte aux vagues profondeurs . . .
Elle court à jamais . . . [l]es blanches prétentaines . . .
Aux pays angéliques . . . [o]ù montent ses ardeurs . . .
Et loin de la matière . . . [e]t des brutes laideurs . . .
Elle rêve l'essor aux célestes Athènes¹³ (Chaurette 53f)*

These attempts to sacralize his world, to return to paradise, result in the creation of sacred time. Eliade describes sacred time as:

a primordial mythical time made present . . . it is indefinitely recoverable, indefinitely repeatable . . . it could be said that it does not 'pass'. . . it always remains equal to itself, it neither changes nor is exhausted. (Eliade 68f).

Those who embrace sacred time refuse "to live solely in what, in modern terms, is called the historical present." (Eliade 70). Instead, for them time is circular, with all events happening at once.

Chaurette heralds Nelligan's move into a world of "indefinitely recoverable, indefinitely repeatable" time when the opening chorus states: "*Le crucifix de bois se transfigure silencieusement en attendant que sonne l'angélus...Et le temps va-t-il encore s'arrêter? Pourquoi faut-il que ce soit toujours, cette chambre qui s'éclaire comme un theatre?*"¹⁴ (Chaurette 31). Time is frozen between the tenth and eleventh tolls of the angelus, as The Teacher points out at the start of Scene 1 and again at the play's conclusion:

L'INSTITUTEUR: *Midi, monsieur le recteur.*

LE RECTEUR: *L'angélus ne sonne que dix coups?*

L'INSTITUTEUR: *Douze coups, monsieur.*

LE RECTEUR: *Cela m'étonne. Je n'ai entendu que dix coups.*

¹³ "In distant lights my coloured thoughts unfold
"Out of some crypt of undetermined deep.
" They run forever on white ways that hold
"Toward that angelic land where fervours leap;
"Far from the squalor of this material heap
"They dream a flight to heavenly Athens old." (Trans. Cogswell)

¹⁴ " The wooden crucifix transforms silently waiting for the sound of the angelus...And will time still stop? Why am I always in this bedroom lit as though it were a theatre?"

L'INSTITUTEUR: *Vous entendrez bientôt le onzième, puis le douzième.*
LE RECTEUR: *Ces silences entre chaque son de cloche...*¹⁵ (Chaurette
32)

The play takes place in "*Ces silences entre chaque son de cloche*" during which, as La Petite notes near the play's end, "*il sécoule un siècle.*"¹⁶ (Chaurette 95). Although the play is set on July 11, 1932, there is no surety during the action as to what day or year it is. La Petite reminds Nelligan that she only sees him on Sundays, but then tells him the day is Monday (the date on which July 11 fell in 1932). The Teacher and the Rector discuss punishing the 12-year-old Nelligan in the same scene in which they consider the 53-year-old Nelligan's treatment at the hospital. The Teacher's visit to the hospital melds into earlier visits from Nelligan's mother and sisters, even as Nelligan is informed that his mother is dead. Chaurette even treats this indefinite time as a joke when, in Scene 8, Paderewski claims, "*J'ai cent ans et je les ai tous connus, Brahms, Chopin, Liszt, Berlioz, et j'en ai connu bien d'autres: Bach, Buxtehude, Haendel, Haydn.*"¹⁷ (Chaurette 64)

Ultimately, Chaurette allows Nelligan to queer time and place, in the sense David Savran would later use:

the boundaries between the traditional and the experimental have become increasingly porous and . . . ostensibly stable meanings and identities (sexual or otherwise) are routinely displaced by notions of mutability, instability, and polyvalence. (Savran 58)

In his efforts to sacralize the world, Nelligan creates a queer space in which time exists beyond Western assumptions of finite linearity. The queer and the sacred become one within Nelligan's fantasy.

The religious elements in *Fragments of a Farewell Letter Read by Geologists* are less obvious, appearing to be confined to the play's final two sections. The

¹⁵ TEACHER: Noon, sir.

RECTOR: The angelus only rang ten times?

TEACHER: Twelve times, sir.

RECTOR: That surprises me. I only heard ten bells.

TEACHER: You'll soon hear the eleventh, then the twelfth.

RECTOR: These silences between each ring of the bell...

¹⁶ "a century passes"

¹⁷ "I'm 100 years old, and I knew them all, Brahms, Chopin, Liszt, Berlioz, and I've known others as well: Bach, Buxtehude, Handel, Haydn."

play presents an inquest into a failed geological expedition in Cambodia and the death of its leader, Toni van Saikin, queering traditional dramatic practice with its requirement that it be played almost entirely by actors seated around a table and often reading from the characters' scientific reports or the notes taken during the investigation. During the lengthy first part, the four geologists who accompanied van Saikin read and discuss their reports. The final two parts, much shorter than the first, consist of uninterrupted testimony from first van Saikin's widow, Carla, and then Xu Sojen, the Cambodian engineer sent to replace van Saikin after his death.

After what, in the play's English-language translation, amounts to 68 pages focusing on scientific discourse, the last two parts offer a more personal response to the death. Carla van Saikin offers what Danielle Salvail calls "*une connaissance absolue, appréhendée affectivement et intellectuellement*."¹⁸ (Quoted in Villemure 92) Although she starts out by reiterating the proof of her husband's death, the return of the bones that are all that remain of him after the rapid decomposition of his body in the Cambodian humidity, she soon expresses a belief in some form of afterlife: "I wonder what the rest of you is thinking about in the Mekong. I know that you must still be writing things you wouldn't even have the right to think otherwise." (Chaurette, *Fragments* 83) She also offers the first suggestion of a sense of sacred time, wherein all events are happening at once:

Today I understand why you liked looking at your face in the water of the lagoon. Part of you was already there, that's why...Part of you was already there, drowned, forever drowned, yet always surviving a bit . . . (Chaurette 84)

This is underlined in her final statements:

Where are you?

I want to know the exact place. What time is it there?...What is the weather like? Tell me the exact time in Asia...Tell me the time, forever... (Chaurette 85f)

According to Eliade, one psychological theory about the myth of the eternal return (which he rejects when applied to archaic religions) sees it as rooted in:

¹⁸ "absolute knowledge, emotionally and intellectually understood."

anxiety before the danger of the new, refusal to assume responsibility for a genuine historical existence, nostalgia for a situation that is paradisaic precisely because it is embryonic, insufficiently detached from nature. (Eliade 93)

That nostalgia seems particularly apt given that much of Carla's testimony focuses on an earlier experience, before their marriage, when she and Toni visited Africa and swam in the Ebrié Lagoon.

Xu Sojen's testimony at the play's conclusion represents what Graham Wolfe considers the "ever-increasing importations of 'Asiatic' philosophy and mysticism." (Wolfe 248) Indeed, Sojen proposes a more mystical approach in describing his first view of Toni van Saikin's corpse:

There he was, serene, watching the end of everything. His arms open, his palms turned toward the water, he was on the other side of eternity waiting for everything to begin again. . . . His soul was huddling there in his gaze, determined to stay as long as possible in this body still caught up in dying. (Chaurette 91f)

That passage first suggests a sense of the eternal return. According to Eliade, many religions view time as having a start, "a primordial time, not to be found in the historical past, as *original time*, in the sense that it came into existence all at once, that it was not preceded by another time" (Eliade 72). Sojen's subsequent statement that "In the hue of the rains, it looked like the very first moments of the universe" (Chaurette 93) underlines that.

In many cultures, this time created through some great feat of heroism, by the god or gods slaying some primordial monster to create the world. Sojen references such a story, in this case depicting god creating the world through his own death, in describing his first night at the campsite:

Before falling into the sleep of the long night of hope, I thought of Huan Chou, the god of lightning who died piercing his own body, and whose wound foreshadowed the place where the world, as we know it, was to be born. (Chaurette 94)

This story links van Saikin's death to the world of myth, according to Villemure: "*Du meme coup, par la bouche de Xu Sojen, Toni rejoint le côté fabuleux du mythe. Sa mort n'est plus un simple décès, elle constitue la réincarnation du mythe du*

commencement du monde."¹⁹ (Villemure 90) In this return to creation, van Saikin becomes part of sacred time: "He didn't exist, he pre-existed, he didn't pre-exist, he existed, it all comes down to the same thing when you're looking at infinity." (Chaurette 93)

All of this provides a distinct contrast to the earlier passages in which the geologists and Ostwald, head of the inquest, fail in their attempts to quantify van Saikin's death and the mission's failure. In his opening testimony, Lloyd Macurdy unconsciously creates a metaphor for the inquest in his description of the Cambodian campsite as "a muddy terrain, a terrain that threatened to shift at any moment." (Chaurette 14) That queer, ever-shifting terrain is reflected in the geologists' failure to agree on even the most basic facts about the expedition. Because of their differing viewpoints, they cannot agree on the meaning of van Saikin's letter, eight pages, most of it water-damaged except for three pages of introductory phrases:

*When you read these lines, in this god-forsaken part of the world . . .
When you read these lines, on this shore beyond all landmarks...on the
banks of this river . . .
By the time you have read these lines... (Chaurette 12)*

Were these his notes on the expedition, as they thought as van Saikin was writing, or a farewell letter? If the latter, then to whom? His colleagues, his wife, himself, or, as Sojen initially proposes, nobody? Beyond that, they cannot even agree on whether or not they really knew him:

NIKOLS OSTWALD: So you knew Toni van Saikin well?
JASON CASSILLY: That depends upon what you mean by well.
NIKOLS OSTWALD: I would like you to answer yes or no.
JASON CASSILLY: If I answered no, I would be lying to you.
NIKOLS OSTWALD: Then you did know him well.
JASON CASSILLY: In one sense.
NIKOLS OSTWALD: (*unruffled*) In what sense?
JASON CASSILLY: He was not someone you got to know easily.
NIKOLS OSTWALD: Meaning?
JASON CASSILLY: He wasn't very talkative. He was strange.
NIKOLS OSTWALD: Could you go further than that?
JASON CASSILLY: He was strange. (Chaurette 51f)

¹⁹ "In one stroke, from the mouth of Xu Sojen, Toni rejoins the fabulous side of the myth. His death is more than a simple demise, it constitutes the reincarnation of the myth of the world's creation."

Neither can they explain how he died, offering only that "Toni van Saikin died because the expedition was bound to fail" (Chaurette 15) and "it was obvious" (Chaurette 68). They cannot even agree about whether the sun was shining on a particular day. Ostwald produces a picture distorted by the bright sun on the day it was taken, which seems to contradict their claim that it was raining all the time:

NIKOLS OSTWALD: You're not going to try to tell me it's raining
in this photograph?

DAVID LENOWSKI *studies the photograph.*

DAVID LENOWSKI: No, you're right.

NIKOLS OSTWALD: So it was sunny that day.

DAVID LENOWSKI: No, Mr. Chairman. It was raining.

NIKOLS OSTWALD: But you admit yourself that the sun is shining
in this photograph?

DAVID LENOWSKI: From there to admitting that it was sunny
that day...Listen, I don't want to contradict you, but I just
can't remember. (Chaurette 67)

Even when the geologists produce scientific analyses of the mission, the health hazards they faced in Cambodia or van Saikin's psychological problems it leads to more mystery. When Ostwald refuses to write in his report that van Saikin was "strange," Ralph Peterson suggests, "If you're not happy with the word 'strange,' just write that he was neurasthenic, cyclothymic, write that he was crazy." (Chaurette 56)

As Wolfe suggests, the play can easily be read as "a critique of (Western) over-reliance on scientific discourse" (Wolfe 250) Does this view of Western rationalism failing in the face of a queer world suggest that Carla van Saikin and Xu Sojen's more spiritual views are the answer? An argument could be made that their placement at the end of the play valorizes them, but is that the only possible way of looking at the play? It will take a look at a third play by Chaurette to come to some conclusion.

Religion is much more prominent in *Stabat Mater II*. Chaurette drew the title for his account of a town on the Adriatic where numerous young women have drowned in a recently opened canal from the 13th century hymn: "Rhyming verse in twenty tercets of three lines celebrating compassion of the Virgin for the suffering of her crucified son" (Marc

Honneger quoted in Tremblay 41) and praying for salvation through the love of Christ. Mirroring the hymn's structure, Chaurette breaks his play into twenty scenes with twenty characters, nineteen mothers who have come to identify their drowned daughters and the clerk at the morgue who shows them the bodies. The twenty scenes do not correspond directly to the twenty tercets, though each shares the hymn's depiction of maternal suffering. In the final scene, however, the novelist, whose book *L'Enfant du desert* has provided some comfort to the grieving mothers, echoes the hymn's language when she describes the grief of the mothers as "*un glaive acéré plongé dans leurs coeurs.*"²⁰ (Chaurette SMII 53)

Another religious element is added by the name "Isak," or "Isaac," which refers to both the river running through the canal and the town newspaper that reports each newly discovered body, the *Courrier de l'Isak*. As Julie Tremblay points out, the use of the name Isaac, the son God ordered Abraham to sacrifice, echoes the plays theme of "*sacrifice et la redemption*"²¹ (Tremblay 49). That name also connects directly to the hymn *Stabat Mater*: "*Les Pères on vu dans le sacrifice d'Isaac le prototype de la Passion de Jésus. L'épisode préfigurant le sacrifice du Christ, l'issue chrétienne semble opter pour l'accomplissement réel de la mise à mort du fils.*"²² (Tremblay 54)

For all this, however, Manustro is a decidedly secular town. Religion informs the language, as the women talk of souls and prayers, but "soul" is more often used pejoratively, its lack serving as an attack on people in whom the women find insufficient sympathy, and prayers are more often addressed to secular things—to buildings, to the canal, or to other people—than to any deity. When the Third Mother speaks of the city's new church, she describes it as a force for secularization:

Nous n'avions pas de cathédrale. Nous en avons une à present, dont le futurisme rend notre monde perplexe. Et c'est bien. On la critique. On la

²⁰ "a sharp sword plunged into their hearts."

²¹ "sacrifice and redemption."

²² "The forefathers have seen in the sacrifice of Isaac the prototype for the Passion of Jesus. The episode prefigures Christ's sacrifice, the Christian outcome that seems to opt for the real fulfillment of the execution of the son."

*remet en question. On doute de sa grandeur, certains la révoquent, et c'est bien.*²³ (Chaurette 14)

When the women speak of Sunday activities, they refer not to churchgoing, but rather to walking along the esplanade by the canal. Indeed, their most pressing concern about the church is the number of rood screens it contains, a number deemed ostentatious by two of the mothers, one of whom derides the fact that for all the rood screens there are no *prie-Dieux*: "*Je vois mal ici comment l'on peut s'agenouiller.*"²⁴ (Chaurette 33) The Second Mother tries to wish her daughter back to life not through prayer, but through an appeal to the girl's secular nature: "*Il faut lâcher prise, laisser, venir à toi la résurrection, sans effort, oublie le miracle, oublie l'exploit, la sanctification est un leurre, tu ne dois penser qu'au trait d'union . . .*"²⁵ (Chaurette 13)

Where spirituality enters the work most fully is in the words of the Ninth Mother, author of the book *L'Enfant du desert*. After appearing in Scene Nine, she returns for the play's twentieth and final scene, this time dubbed "*la romancière*," "the novelist." She repeats a story told previously about a young Arab who had jumped into the canal and seemingly drowned on the day it opened. In her version, however, she provides the historical context for the play's action, stating that while searching for his body, divers had recovered the bodies of the young women whose deaths drive the play's plot. More important than this seeming rational basis for the action, however, is her description of the young man's fate:

Certains pensent qu'on aurait repêché son corps le lundi, d'autres prétendent qu'on ne l'a toujours pas retrouvé. On pense qu'il s'est résorbé dans le récit de sa naissance, ou qu'il a gagné un mystérieux ravage, cet enfant noyé ruisselant de ses vies antérieures, qui aurait parcouru tous les chemins de la terre, depuis le Maghreb jusqu'aux pôles, en passant par

²³ " We didn't have a cathedral. We have one now, whose liberal ideas make everything more confusing. And that's good. We think critically. We question. We doubt its greatness, some reject it, and that's good."

²⁴ "I don't see how people can pray."

²⁵ "You must let go, let go, resurrect yourself, easily, forget miracles, forget great achievements, the holy is in you, think only of Socialism . . ."

*Amsterdam, Venise, Manustro, ces villes naufrage dont on voit émerger
les restes, les ornements, le chagrin, la dentelle.*²⁶ (Chaurette 53)

This dense set of images mirrors the descriptions of the deceased Toni van Saikin in *Fragments of a Farewell Letter Read by Geologists*. Like van Saikin, the Arab youth becomes an image of the eternal return, For those who believe it, this child—described by Cassy Bouchard as "*en suspens, dissoute intégralement entre la vie et la mort*"²⁷ (Bouchard 99)—captures a nostalgia for a return to the beginnings of life. That return is also reflected in the novelist's description of his passage through "*ces villages naufrage,*" cities that are themselves returning to the origins of life.

Bouchard extends this to apply to all the drowned women and their mothers, suggesting that the drownings represent "*un fantasme de mort imminente et de retour à la vie.*"²⁸ (Bouchard 101). The Thirteenth Mother describes her daughter as still alive: "*Elle caresse la soie des épis. Elle vit. C'est la cause de la Cause. Elle se dirige vers le portique de l'ange. Elle lui donne le vécu de son 'déjà.'* Elle a contourné tous les obstacles, je le sais par les signaux qu'elle m'envoie...."²⁹ (Chaurette 41) So, too, the Seventeenth Mother, dubbed "The Consolation," asks her deceased daughter, "*Tes grandes yeux, que voient-ils à présent?*"³⁰ (Chaurette 49) Bereavement is itself a new beginning for the fourteenth mother, who reveals that her daughter has left a child behind:

Écoutez: elle venait d'accoucher. Je suis allée plus qu'au bout de moi-même avec elle et vous me dites que je dois recommencer! Oui: c'est ce que

²⁶ "Some thought they recovered his body on Monday, others pretend they never recovered it. We think he returned to nature, or he made it to some mysterious shore, this child washed away in his past lives, which had traveled every road on Earth, from the Maghreb to the poles, passing through Amsterdam, Venice, Manustro, those sinking cities whose remains alone we see, the ornaments, the grief, the lacework."

²⁷ "suspended, fully dissolved between life and death"

²⁸ "a fantasy of imminent death and the return of life."

²⁹ "She's caressing the corn silk. She is living. It is the cause of causes. She is heading to the angel's bridge. She gives them the experience of her 'just now.' She has bypassed every obstacle, I know it from the signals she gives me"

³⁰ "Your big eyes, what are they seeing now?"

*vous êtes en train de me dire. Que non seulement tout s'efface, mais que tout est à reinventer.*³¹ (Chaurette 38)

With the novelist's observations on the young Arab's death, Chaurette creates an image of a city whose inhabitants "*cherchent à retrouver l'extase rêvée d'un retour à l'origine première, de revivre la plénitude de la naissance, mais qui passe avant tout par une invitation à la mort.*"³² (Bouchard 101f)

Were this image of the eternal return given the final word in *Stabat Mater II*, it would leave the same questions as had *Fragments of a Farewell Letter Read by Geologists*. Instead, the novelist is addressed by the Third Mother, who talks of the peace created by *l'Enfant du désert* and asks if that was the novelist's intention. Earlier in the play others of the women have spoken of the spiritual message they have taken from the book. In its final pages, a child dies after seeing what one woman describes as "*une vision de splendeur. . . . Moi je crois qu'après avoir tant observé les ténèbres, elle a enfin gagné le miracle d'une révélation. Je pense même que cette révélation est la vie éternelle.*"³³ (Chaurette 32) The novelist rejects this interpretation, dismissing her ending as "*psychologique et triviale.*"³⁴ (Chaurette 32) In the final scene, however, she offers a more artistic and, arguably spiritual assessment of her work:

*Pour ce qui est du travail de nos têtes, et de notre fatigue à trouver des réponses, il nous reste la vie. Quand je serai vicille, j'écrirai peut-être des livres en forme de réponses; ils seront plus rassurants. Mais il faudrait pour cela que je quitte cette tendance à reconnaître des enfants qui ne sont pas les miens, et à me demander pourquoi...pourquoi.*³⁵

³¹ " Listen, she just had a child. I've devoted my life to raising her, and you're telling me I have to start over. Yes: that's what you're telling me. That not only does everything disappear, but everything is born again."

³² "are trying to recover the ecstasy dreamt of in returning to birth, but which requires above all an invitation to death."

³³ "a vision of splendor. . . . I believe that after having looked into the darkness, she reaches a state of revelation. I even think that revelation was the key to eternal life."

³⁴ "psychological and trivial."

³⁵ " However much we think and wear ourselves out looking for answers, we still live. When I'm old, I'll probably write books in the form of answers, they'll be more reassuring. But to do that, I'll have to get over the habit of recognizing children who aren't mine and asking myself why...why."

The novelist's last words echo Ostwald's persistent questioning in *Fragments of a Farewell Letter Read by Geologists*: "A man died. I ask you why. Why did you watch him die? Why this silence? Why not say why?" (Chaurette, *Fragments* 69). They also relate to a statement Chaurette made in an interview a year after *Stabat Mater II*'s premiere:

*"Au fond, j'écris sur des choses que j'ai envie d'explorer ou d'approfondir. Pas sur une matière qui m'est familière. La seule chose qui m'intéresse, en réalité, c'est de commencer un texte pour voir ce qu'il va dire, et comment."*³⁶ (Chaurette, in Riendeau 448)

That suggests the decidedly postmodern approach to reality pursued by Kate Moss in her analysis of madness in the plays of Chaurette and René-Daniel Dubois. She draws on the work of Elinor Fuchs, who suggests that writers since Derrida have placed "writing—as subject, activity, and artifact—at the center." (Elinor Fuchs, in Moss 36) In Chaurette's and Dubois' plays, particularly those dealing with madness, that produces what Moss calls "their attack on the logocentrism of Western metaphysics." (Moss 36) Madness is "exploited for its power to subvert and destabilize. . . . to draw attention to the impossibility of fixing truths and to the power of writing over speech." (Moss 43f)

Viewing Moss's ideas through the lens of Eliade's work, I would suggest that through writing one "*undertake[s] the creation of the world that one has chosen to inhabit*" (Eliade 51), one embarks upon the eternal return. In a postmodern sense, writing is the only reality of which one can be certain. It is a lonely act of creation—the women of Manustro fail to see what the Ninth Mother is doing in *L'Enfant du Desert*—but it is an act of creation nonetheless.

That would appear most obvious in *Rêve d'une nuit d'hôpital*. Hospitalized at Saint-Jean-de-Dieu, Émile Nelligan is deprived of his writing, the only avenue he has for creating the world he chooses to inhabit. In place of writing, he creates the world through his fantasies, returning to the paradisaic state of his childhood in Cacouna and seeking to bring elements of that paradise into his hellish existence in the hospital. Objective truth is irrelevant. Time and place shift freely

³⁶ " Basically, I write about things I want to explore or deepen. Surely not something with which I'm familiar. The only thing that interests me, in reality, is to begin a text in order to see what it's going to say, and how."

in the imaginary, sacred space he creates between the tenth and eleventh strokes of the angelus.

For the characters in *Fragments of a Farewell Letter Read by Geologists*, the only truth for each character is the world he or she has created through the composition of reports and testimonies. The spirituality expressed by Carla van Saikin and Xu Sojen is just another way of creating a world with which to deal with the unanswerable why of existence.

After nineteen scenes of women trying to make sense out of their daughters' deaths in *Stabat Mater II*, the only truth is the act of creating some way of making sense. Faced with unspeakable grief, all one can do is follow the verbal lead of eighteen of the mothers and the written lead of the novelist in asking "*pourquoi*."

In Charette's plays then, religion is just another way of creating the world. Despite the religious mood created by his frequent use of repetition, within the context of other approaches to answering the unanswerable it is just another failed system. It is also, however, a part of the battle in which humanity seems eternally engaged, the fight to create the world one has chosen to inhabit. In the face of chaos, all one can do is write—a novel, a poem, a fantasy, a report, a speech—and in that act, however brief, the chaos recedes and the world is created anew.

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