

Modernity in Acadian Poetry: The Case of Ronald Després

By Matthew Cormier

Two major Acadian renaissances are generally credited with having influenced Acadian poetry and culture, the first occurring around the mid-nineteenth century and the second shortly after the mid twentieth century.¹ Both groups of poets during these transitional periods share the desire to promote an Acadian nationalism, with the latter often dubbed neonationalist because of its political preoccupation with redefining Acadie in terms of its traditional religious and rural characterizations. At the dawn of the second renaissance, a compelling moment in Acadian poetry emerges: during the time period spanning roughly 1958 to 1972 Ronald Després publishes three collections of poetry: *Silences à nourrir de sang* (1958), *Les Cloisons en vertige* (1962), and *Le Balcon des dieux inachevés* (1968). These works do not reflect the traditional Acadian poetry made popular by the first wave of nationalist poets, such as Napoléon Landry, nor do they anticipate directly the second-wave poets, since they are not distinctly neo-nationalist. Rather, Després' poetry seems out of time and place or, as Maurice Raymond proposes, "à la rencontre de deux mondes—celui d'une Acadie passéiste, dominée par les vestiges épars du nationalisme religieux, et celui d'une Acadie aspirant à la modernité" (141). As such, considering the case of Després' poetry as a herald to the neonationalist renaissance is integral to understanding better the significance of the work of Acadian poets during the early 1970s, such as Raymond Guy Leblanc, Guy Arsenault, and Herménégilde Chiasson.

While a number of sources acknowledge to a certain extent the magnitude of Després' work in the broader context of the neonationalist poetic movement of the 1970s, he remains largely obscure in terms of scholarship outside of Maurice Raymond's work. What's more, Raymond's defining work on Després, despite having published in short spurts on him since, is his dissertation project. In this book-length project, Raymond argues that Després' poetry, fiction, short fiction, and unpublished works comprise a complex codex: by recalling the works of theorists such as Umberto Eco, Roland Barthes, and Catherine Kerbrat-Orecchioni, Raymond assesses Després' writing as a literal code for a figurative meaning, specifically that of repressed homosexuality. Raymond certainly sustains his argument, and

even takes up the task of sifting through various archives to demonstrate Després' trajectory in alienating himself from traditional Acadian poets of his era while becoming a herald for modernity, thus cementing the significance of the writer's role in ushering in a new era of Acadian poetry. Raymond, however, does not dwell on Després' direct influence on the collective movement of the neonationalist poets of the 1970s, arguably because this influence does not feed into his psychoanalytic reading of the Acadian writer. In this respect, a study of Després' work, particularly of his poetry within the context of the neonationalist movement of the second Acadian renaissance, is greatly overdue. This essay, therefore, offers an alternative reading of Després' poetry from that of Raymond, chronicling it alongside the poet's contextual moment, to argue his pioneer place within—as well as influence on—the Acadian, neonationalist, poetic movement, particularly that of Raymond Guy LeBlanc's *Cri de Terre* (1972).

Situating Després and the Neonationalist Poets

Three major poets and their works define the beginning of the second Acadian renaissance: Raymond Guy LeBlanc's *Cri de terre*, Guy Arsenault's *Acadie Rock* (1973) and Herménégilde Chiasson's *Mourir à Scoudouc* (1974). In his important anthology of modern Acadian literature, *Paroles d'Acadie: Anthologie de la littérature acadienne, 1958-2009* (2010), David Lonergan prefaces this period with the subtitle "Un pays à inventer" (14) to emphasize the neonationalist consciousness at the time. LeBlanc's *Cri de terre* is the inaugural publication of the newly founded Éditions d'Acadie, Acadie's first publishing house. With LeBlanc's edgy testament to the cultural renaissance of a tenacious Acadie, Lonergan argues that "[il] devient le chantre d'une poésie issue du pays, vécue dans le pays, s'adressant à tous ceux qui cherchent à créer une Acadie moderne qui s'affirme et s'affiche" (15). Comparatively, *Acadie Rock* is composed while Arsenault is a teenager at the Vanier school, and so his poetry represents a kind of juvenile assault on political and educational institutions. Lonergan points out that Arsenault "utilise une langue proche de l'oralité dans laquelle le poète intègre le chiac" (15). The Acadian dialect of Chiac thus becomes for Arsenault an asset in asserting identity. Finally, Chiasson's *Mourir à Scoudouc* is perhaps a more reflexive work than that of LeBlanc or Arsenault. Lonergan proposes that Chiasson "oppose, dans sa quête d'un pays dont il faut définir les contours et les frontières, modernité et folklorisation, affirmation de l'identité acadienne et assimilation" (15). Therefore, by drawing

on the tensions between Acadian modernity and folklore Chiasson is able to affirm strongly a contemporary Acadian identity.

All three poets thus have in common the desire to assert a voice that unifies a “modern” Acadie. Primarily it is a generational clash that defines modernity in Acadie: the younger generation is dissatisfied with traditional expressions of Acadie, which typically denote rural and religious imagery in constrained alexandrine verse, such as that found in the work of Napoleon Landry; it also wishes to rebel against the Anglophone cultural domination of southern New Brunswick. These differences result in a general disagreement with past generations as to the nationalist strategy of Acadie. The neonationalist Acadian poets, therefore, attempt to reclaim Acadie from its traditional depictions and from Anglophone oppression by writing a modern Acadie in free verse and with urban imagery, often playing with the French and English languages and, in general, deconstructing Acadian institutional authorities, such as the Church and schools, to repurpose them for their movement. This movement gathered momentum as the continuation of Ronald Després’ pioneer work, which, published only several years prior to their emergence, anticipated the new wave of Acadian writers with its own modern poetics.²

Upon completing his Licentiate in Philosophy at the University of Paris in 1956, Després returns to Moncton, where he soon begins working at *L’Évangéline*, the Acadian newspaper.³ While on staff, Després also launched a literary page featuring a number of his early poems. At the outset of this page, Després challenged traditional Acadian poetry in an editorial:

Mais la lutte pour la survivance sera assurée le jour où nous aurons un noyau de romanciers et de poètes doués, de penseurs solides, capables d’exprimer nos aspirations comme groupe, de réfléter [sic] esthétiquement nos tendances, notre mentalité, notre façon de penser, de réagir, de sentir et de voir les choses. Non pas une littérature de terroir qui reste prisonnière des étroites limites qu’elle s’est imposée [sic] mais une littérature qui saura marier la couleur locale à l’analyse subtile du cœur humain.⁴

Després declares the current Acadian poetry of his time as “a prisoner of its own imposed limits,” and calls for a new wave of poets to redefine aesthetically an Acadian consciousness. While this proposition anticipates the eventual rallying cry of the neonationalist poets, it is interpreted as disrespectful by traditional Acadian writers, chiefly those with a religious allegiance. As a result, the religious page at *L’Évangéline*, “La Vie Religieuse,” quickly became a rival to Després’ literary page. In time, this

rivalry grew into what Després calls “une véritable querelle des Anciens et des Modernes” (qtd. in Raymond, 89-90), a highly publicized argument between Després and his supporters for a modern Acadie, and Euclide Daigle, editor of *L'Évangéline*, and his followers, who defended traditional Acadie. The resulting public debate had the effect of disrupting the status quo and, for the first time since the initial Acadian renaissance, Acadie became conscious of a cultural shift, in this case towards modernity (Raymond 91-2).

For Després, however, his argument with Acadian literary traditionalists was a personal one and, in 1957, he left Acadie and relocated to Ottawa, writing and publishing his poetry in exile while working as an interpreter for the federal government. In fact, Després did not reconcile with members of Acadie's literary community until 1972, when he was invited to be a guest of honour at “La Nuit de la poésie et de la chanson acadiennes,” a gathering of over sixty Acadian artists.⁵ The event inspired him and he published a poem later that year which, particularly in its final verses, seems to demonstrate his restored faith in Acadie: “Tu es, mon Acadie / – Et sans douleur, cette fois – / Pays de partance” (qtd. in Loneragan 99). Around this time, Després also watched *L'Acadie, l'Acadie* (1971), a watershed film documenting the student protests in 1968 at the Université de Moncton, and was affected profoundly by the students' plight. He then wrote a letter to the editor at *L'Évangéline*, in which he reflects upon the current state of Acadians in Moncton:

Mais que diable se passe-t-il donc à Moncton ? Une dizaine d'années me séparent de ces étudiants qui gesticulent. C'est ça, l'accélération de l'histoire. Il suffit d'une demi-génération pour que les questions qu'on posait, au creux de sa petite angoisse individuelle, soient reprises au diapason collectif. Une demi-génération pour que le cri du cœur prenne forme et couleur. (qtd. in Loneragan 107)

Després' description of a “cri de coeur” taking form seems to anticipate LeBlanc, himself a fellow pianist having studied philosophy in France, and his collection of poetry, *Cri de terre*, published later that year. Since both writers took similar academic and artistic paths and, according to Després, were preoccupied with the same “questions qu'on posait, au creux de sa petite angoisse individuelle” about a modern Acadie, understanding Després' own problematic relationship with Acadie is essential to grasping his influence on LeBlanc and the neonationalist wave of young poets of the 1970s.

Després and LeBlanc

Després' influence on LeBlanc's poetry is not only contextual in the sense that it speaks to the neonationalist Acadian movement towards modernity, but his influence is also rooted in LeBlanc's formative years as a young writer. In an interview with Robert Viau in 2000, LeBlanc explains his first encounter with Després and his works:

La lecture de l'œuvre de ces auteurs, et en particulier celle de Ronald Després, a déclenché quelque chose en moi. Il y avait une photo de Després dans les couloirs du collège. Un jour, j'ai demandé au père Johnson : « C'est qui ça ? ». Il m'a répondu que c'était Ronald Després, un poète. Tout de suite, j'ai senti une parenté avec ce gars-là, même qu'il me ressemblait... Il y avait un père capucin qui m'aidait à formuler mes vers... Mes premières armes en poésie ont commencé avec les romantiques, puis les poètes du Québec, puis un Acadien, Ronald Després. (n.p.)⁶

When LeBlanc started writing poetry in the 1960s, the exact time he began to write a number of the poems that comprise *Cri de terre*, he was already familiar with Després' works. He even claims to have modeled his verses in Després' style. Després' influence on LeBlanc, however, is not limited to style, but also seeps into the themes and images of his poetry. For instance, in the same interview, LeBlanc quotes his own poetry, explaining that he took seven years to write this particular verse: "Dans ce lac sommeillant, tel un beau diamant / Parmi les eaux, saute une étoile vagabonde" (n.p.). His image of the "étoile vagabonde" hints to Després, since the opening poem to *Silences à nourrir de sang*, Després' first collection of poetry, is entitled "Chanson du vagabond." Both poets are thus intertwined in terms of style, imagery, and also theme, namely that of a desire for liberation. Notable differences between the two poets emerge in their respective tones, however, as well as in the essential communication at the heart of their collections. For instance, Després allows his poetry to immerse itself in individual despair at the possibility of liberation, which appears to be unattainable. In the case of LeBlanc, his poetry builds momentum, assembling ideas and strength as it rolls along until it breaks free and into a sort of collective Acadian rebirth.

Even though Maurice Raymond does not pay attention to the strong connection between both poets' works, he underlines a number of recurring images in Després that bear a striking similarity to those found in LeBlanc's *Cri de Terre*, particularly with respect to the idea of a desire for liberation. Raymond points out a certain theatricality and mirroring in Després' poetry that camouflage its meaning, and an obsession with some

inner turmoil (311). Moreover, he argues that metaphors of circularity (313), or ineluctability, as well as images of the exiled outcast, often depicted as a type of vampire figure, occupy much of Després' poetry. Raymond's main point of contention, however, is that Després is repressing homosexual desires, which is why metaphors of masturbation and castration recur in his verse (313). While Raymond's argument is convincing, the metaphors and images in Després' poetry, even if related to personal turmoil, seem to be more aligned with the general idea of a painful exclusion from Acadie. LeBlanc, in his work, takes up several of these same metaphors and images and uses them productively to imagine a new Acadie.

One particular image that recurs in Després' poetry is that of the prisoner. Prior to the publication of his poetry, Després comments in *L'Évangéline* on Acadian literature being "prisonnière des étroites limites qu'elle s'est imposée [*sic*]," which anticipates the general idea of ineluctability present in his works. For instance, in addition to the numerous references to "silence" or "being silenced" in *Silences à nourrir de sang* and implicit references to ineluctability, ideas of imprisonment and of being "shipwrecked" often appear explicitly: "Devenir prisonniers / Des filaments de soie / Qui nous ligotent au matelas" (22); "Où l'angoisse et la crainte gonflaient mes tempes / L'angoisse de ta perte – la crainte de ton naufrage" (25); "Et ta tête fauchée / Prisonnière de mes bras" (37); "Au-delà de cette vallée où nous allons souffrir / Au-delà de ces prisons où nous allons mourir / Ta présence percera la muraille de mes jours" (41); "La mer gronde dans mon âme / Son éternel naufrage" (48).⁷ The subjects in these examples are compelling because the speaker, presumably Després, names himself as well as an unidentified "other" as prisoners, as both are seemingly exiled from each other. Moreover, this other becomes the means to liberation in verses such as "Ta présence percera la muraille de mes jours." By replacing the repressed homosexuality that Raymond targets with Acadie as the unidentified other, a stronger connection between Després' poetry to LeBlanc's becomes apparent.

Cri de terre also begins fittingly with a section entitled "Silences" (19). Accordingly, and similarly to Després' first collection, this section features a great number of references to silence and being silenced. The image of the prisoner, like with Després, is also prominent in this section: "Elle est prisonnière de son ombre et se confond avec elle / Dans l'alternance du réveil et du sommeil" (22); "J'ai peur quand tombe la nuit / En fermant la porte le vent a de drôles de manies / D'allumer sur les murs des barreaux" (24); "Il est de ces vies à toutes vies semblables / Comme fleurs prison-

nières sous le béton / Tendus vers d'inaccessibles regards" (26). Rather than falling into despair like Després, however, LeBlanc compares the image of the prisoner to a dormant flower awaiting to bloom—to be liberated. His poetry contains an element of inspiration, of giving a voice to the silenced. One could argue, then, that the authors' respective approaches differ in that Després uses poetry as his point of exit from Acadie, from which he is exiled, while LeBlanc uses poetry as a point of entry into Acadie, which he is trying to renew.

Silence as productive—as the site of creation—is significant in the works of both Després and LeBlanc, as it has been in a number of Acadian literary texts. In "Du lieu de création en Acadie: Entre le trop-plein et le nulle part" (1993), Henri-Dominique Paratte argues: "Au départ, dirons-nous, il y avait le silence. Un silence intense à divers degrés, et où se fonde, dans l'incertitude, dans l'errance, dans la difficulté d'être, l'expression acadienne elle-même" (n.p.). Among others, Paratte names Després and LeBlanc as writers for which silence becomes a truly Acadian mode of expression (n.p.). A compelling aspect of Després and LeBlanc's poetry thus lies with the various manners in which silence influences their works. For Paratte, "le silence collectif, et la menace d'un silence définitif, planent sur la création acadienne" (n.p.), and the threat of silence is constantly at work in Després and LeBlanc's poetry. Silence, while at the site of creation, threatens to overwhelm the poet and consume him. For both these poets, creation is synonymous with poetry, and silence is simultaneously a driving force and imminent threat.

Poetry itself, or the craft of the artist, is thus at the heart of both writers' works. In particular, both poets evoke the image of the writer's tool: his hand. In the case of Després, his poetry often features the image of mutilated or incapacitated hands, which Raymond associates with the shame of masturbation. In *Silences*, the image appears frequently: "Puis brusquement / Un soir qu'on lui avait coupé les mains / ... / Sa chanson mourut sur ses lèvres" (12); "Et nos mains fléchissantes / Nos mains souillés de boue" (36); "Qui nous rendra nos mains / Et nos sourires au fond des lacs?" (54); "Notre angoisse a tout éventré / Et nos mains ensanglantées / Esclaves de la fureur d'Hérode" (58). The line "Sa chanson mourut sur ses lèvres" comes from the first poem in the collection, and states explicitly that "cutting the artist's hands" results in silencing his voice. While Raymond sustains effectively his argument on the topic of masturbation, Després' references to incapacitated hands seems as likely to refer to his exclusion from Acadie and smothering of his creativity.

Reading Després' use of the image of incapacitated hands as a limitation—or silencing—of his creativity in relation to Acadie is perhaps more compelling when considering the role of hands in LeBlanc's work. Again by contrast to Després' *Silences*, the "Silences" section of LeBlanc's *Cri de terre* features hands that are actively working and on the cusp of discovery: "J'ai frappé à ta porte avec ma main blessée / L'hiver étant venu dans la nuit des hommes / J'ai frappé à ta porte avec mes deux mains" (23); "J'accroche ma main au rocher du nuage / Un songe me brise un miroir / Et tout aveugle se ressemble" (25); "Ma main hésitante devant l'outil / Ma main hésitante devant ton corps devant ta vie / Devant moi-même" (28). Like with Després, the hands in LeBlanc's work are wounded and bloodied; however, they continue to work, continue to reach for the tool, which, for LeBlanc, is poetry itself. "Hands as tools" are thus a recurring image for Després and LeBlanc, which takes on a different function in the latter's poetry.

In subsequent sections of *Cri de terre*, LeBlanc builds momentum in a sort of poetic call to arms for Acadie to renew itself, particularly with respect to poems such as "Cri de terre" (55), "Petitcodiac" (58), and "Je suis acadien" (65). The "Silences" section, however, seems to be aligned with Després' own collection of *Silences*. Both poets refer to death and corpses: "Ma nuit est jonchée de cadavres / Qui me délivrera?" (Després 29); "Et les notes qui s'enfuient / Emportées par les bras / De vos corps dépouillés" (Després 54); "Et nos yeux sont remplis de paysages vivants / Tristement dessus des hommes morts" (LeBlanc 21); "Tant et tant de morts tant et tant de vieillards / Et vivre ici est un risque de nous" (LeBlanc 29). Images of distorted mirroring or masking also appear prominently in both works: "Nous n'osons interrompre / Ce repas de reflets" (Després 23); "Puis il n'y a que le silence / Le silence de vos masques" (Després 54); "J'ai peur quand je regarde dans le miroir / Et n'y vois qu'un visage tout autre et blême et long / Un feu terrifiant dans les yeux" (LeBlanc 24); "Il est de ces jours rongés depuis l'aube / Qui se faufilent dans nos illusions de chair / Frissonnant contre le rêve son geste et son sourire" (LeBlanc 26). The similarities between works are numerous. In fact, other than the image of masturbation that Raymond points out, for which another interpretation has been offered concerning incapacitated hands, the image of castration that Raymond highlights remains one of the few major indications of sexual repression rather than a lament for a lost Acadie in Després' poetry, particularly in his first collection.

Raymond argues that the image of castration is present throughout Després' works, from his poetry to his fiction (314-5). He quotes these

lines from “Printemps perdu” in Després’ *Silences* as being an evident image of castration: “Sans une seule flaque de laine / Pour vêtir l’éperon désœuvré / Des cathédrales du vent” (Raymond 315; his emphasis). While the image is certainly phallic, it seems to imply a sense of exposure rather than one of castration. Significantly, LeBlanc employs similar images in several instances throughout *Cri de terre*, but they are not associated typically with the idea of castration. For example, this verse from LeBlanc’s “Hiver” contains an image resembling Després’ own image: “J’ai frappé à ta porte avec le silence de mon corps / Droit comme un arbre / Mais les feuilles au bout des branches se sont tuées” (23). Like with Després, LeBlanc’s verses imply a sense of exposure to the harshness of “winter” (“wind,” in the case of Després). This anxiety concerning exposure, for both poets, appears to be a general symptom of Acadian poets of the time; however, the fourteen years between the publication of *Silences* and *Cri de terre* speak to differences in the tones of both writers. Després, for his part, is isolated, excluded from Acadie under a “ciel qui n’est qu’un desert clos” (65), while LeBlanc is exposing his vulnerability as a young poet, standing in front of a door, ready to move forward.

These examples show the numerous similarities between Després’ first collection and LeBlanc’s *Cri de terre*, while demonstrating simultaneously the almost opposing positions of both poets with respect to Acadie: Després exiled, and LeBlanc embraced. As well as revealing Després’ influence on LeBlanc and the poetry of the second Acadian renaissance, the similarities between both writers’ works incites a rereading of Després as not only an Acadian poet, but an Acadian poet writing about Acadie. While Raymond’s reading of the Acadian author on the subject of repressed sexuality is convincing, Després’ poetry also deserves to be studied through an Acadian lens.

Després: Exiled from Acadie

Reading Després in the context of his exile from Acadie as opposed to through a veil of latent homosexuality changes the perspective on the figure of the outcast in isolation. Rather than the recurring image of the outcast being associated with homosexuality, it becomes representational of Després’ exclusion from Acadie and from Acadian literary circles. In a sense, the speaker in his poetry—most likely Després himself—adopts the attitude of a martyr, suffering due to his exile from Acadie, yet refusing to yield in his belief that Acadie needs to develop new literary ideals. As early as in *Silences*, the exiled figure, in this case the “vagabond,” appears in the collection’s opening poem, “La chanson du vagabond”:

Il accueillait un bruissement de formes pensives
 Roulant de grands gestes anciens
 Et redisant en paroles blondes
 Le refrain de la chanson morte.

(12)

The image of the exiled, the vagabond, reciting the same mantra for a modern Acadie, a song which he believes to be dead to his Acadian contemporaries, occupies a central space in this particular poem. His song develops into a romanticized lament that anticipates later poems: “Les notes que nous pleurons / Forment cette plainte” (14). While this distinct image of the vagabond is somewhat romanticized, other images of the exiled martyr in Després’ later poems and collections become increasingly obscene.

In “Ma nuit noire,” for instance, again from Després’ first collection, explicit images of the martyr’s suffering are prevalent:

Le soleil brulant dessèche
 La corole [*sic*] de mes rêves
 Et le sang du crépuscule
 Coule par mes plaies ouvertes.

(29)

The drying corolla around his dreams and under a burning sun, as well as the blood dripping from open wounds are reminiscent of a Christ-like figure. Moreover, these images of suffering appear to be linked to a desire for the benefit of an “other,” which this reading suggests to be Acadie:

Dédoublee dans la tienne
 Ma vie sera semée d’heures intenses
 Qui multiplieront ton front
 Et la douceur de tes baisers.

(37)

In fact, Després ties these various images together in “Noël méconnu,” stating explicitly that Christ has left his people, his Acadie, feeling betrayed:

Nous n’osons plus prier depuis qu’il n’est plus là
 Nous avons quitté le bercail
 Et nous attendons dans la haine
 L’Enfant qui ne reviendra pas.

(58)

These images of the exiled figure, of the Christ-like martyr, permeate Després' first collection and announce his following works because of their increasing obscenity and accusatory tone. While the initial images of exile and martyrdom from *Silences* imply a yearning for Acadie, a kind of romanticized nostalgia, Després' second collection, *Les Cloisons en vertige*, offers biting images which demonstrate some hostility towards Acadie.

Early on in *Les Cloisons*, Després seems to address his audience of artists with three poems: "Le cénotaphe du rock'n'roll" (77), "Les poètes" (81), and "Le peintre" (82). Of the musicians, the first poem claims that "Grisés par le choc de leurs chaines incolores / Ces bâtards de vingt ans hisseront sur la grève / Leurs cœurs – vastes corbillards de boue" (78). In reference to the poets, the second poem states that "Pour contempler l'écho de leur chanson / Il aura fallu ce massacre de plein jour / Et cette frontière de sang" (81). With respect to the painter, the third poem reveals that

Souvent il plante son chevalet
 En pleine solitude
 Et tient la fièvre de la faim entre ses dents
 Aussi maladroitement qu'un poignard.

(83)

In a similar fashion to LeBlanc's call to arms for Acadian artists, Després puts forth an idea of collectivity and inclusion of other artists in his own suffering as a poet exiled from Acadie. Satirically, he calls poets courtesans "sans peur et sans reproche" (84), asking readers "Pourquoi le poète vient-il nous proposer ses caves et ses marmelades de mots" (84)? Després thus seems to have grown frustrated, as his past, martyr figure lashes out in a satirical tone. In fact, Després seems to target directly Euclide Daigle and his followers at *L'Évangéline* on several occasions throughout *Les Cloisons*, the group that opposes Després' modernist style of poetry. In "Antres interdits," for instance, he conjures up the image of a pack of rabid dogs that take on "human" characteristics:

Les chiens fidèles, en bordure de la foule
 Les chiens à la figure trop humaine
 Collectionnent les foulées
 Lèchent les plaies
 Gobent le sang
 Et hurlent les cris des siècles entassés dans leurs gorges.

(89)

The image of a mob of angry “dogs” nipping at open wounds in front of a crowd of witnesses, likened to the behaviour of Daigle and his followers in *L'Évangéline*, is particularly vivid in this stanza. The final line, concerning “les cris des siècles entassés dans leurs gorges,” also points to the group opposing Després as Acadian traditionalists. His following poem in *Les Cloisons*, “Château-glas,” opens with the lines “Je vis entouré d’une cour de fantômes // Ils m’inventent des habits de roi” (90). This line bears a striking resemblance to Daigle’s critique of Després in “Une critique littéraire,” in which Daigle likens Després to a king from an old fable, who asks his servants about his clothing to determine their honesty.⁸

Like the martyr or Christ figure, Després also adopts the role of prophet in his second collection, as his lashing out develops eventually into warnings of future repercussions with respect to Acadie’s perceived refusal to move into modernity. In “L’an 2000,” a sort of prophesized vision, Després addresses the bloodshed of this future generation, “Carmin, grenat, [et] vermeil,” (102) proclaiming: “Vous êtes la violence d’une époque qui n’est plus là” (102). Against this violence, he proposes action:

Qu’un authentique déluge
Purifie les exvotos de nos gestes ridicules!
Et nous avancerons en rangs serrés
Vers l’arche
Avec des lèvres de néophytes.
Prêts à recommencer la douleur.

(102)

This passage is aggressive, resembling clearly LeBlanc’s call to arms regarding Acadian poets. Després, however, like the word “vertige” implies in this second collection’s title, seems to vacillate violently between this type of prophetic agency and his melancholic martyrdom. In a later poem, “Le jeu des enfants,” Després employs the image of cruel children’s games to return to the martyr figure: “Ils ont dressé le bucher / Étendu le petit martyr / Et ils inventent des tourments” (107); “Abandonnant le petit martyr / Et ses yeux éteints / Sur le bucher de sang” (107). Després’ alterations in tone and position, from the perspective of victim to that of advocate, might explain why several critics deemed *Les Cloisons* to be “uneven.”⁹ His own unstable relationship with Acadie, therefore, permeates this second collection.

Després’ third collection, *Le Balcon des dieux inachevés*, does not build on *Les Cloisons*, in the sense that it has not clarified impressions of unevenness for critics since its publication. Raymond (2003), echoing

Jean-Guy Pilon's assessment in 1968, calls *Le Balcon* "un échec" (76). While Després' final collection is definitely shorter than his two previous works of poetry, to describe it as a failure in 1968 may be premature. Raymond's classification of *Le Balcon* as a failure seems predicated on his own argument concerning repressed homosexuality in Després' entire works. In reading *Le Balcon* as a continuation of Després' troubled relationship with Acadie, familiar images become apparent. The Acadian poet seems to have abandoned his somewhat militant tone from *Les Cloisons* and reverted to the voice of the exiled poet's lament regarding his homeland, which is prevalent in *Silences*. This lament is clear from the opening poems in *Le Balcon*: "J'ai pensé à toi toute la journée," "Attendu que," "Je t'ai aimée," "Mon absente."¹⁰ Whether or not this collection can be considered a "failure," therefore, is of less significance than what it reveals about Després' reconciliation with Acadie.

A particularly strong example of Després' shift towards a reconciliation with Acadie in *Le Balcon* lies with the poem entitled "Les mains." A previous section explored the image of mutilated or incapacitated hands, the poet's tools, as a reflection of Després' own exclusion from Acadie, as well as the manner in which LeBlanc takes up this image in his own work. In this poem, Després revivifies the image of working hands, but in a positive light:

Les mains osseuses de la faim
Les mains terreuses de la guerre
Les mains étincelantes du bal
Les mains gluantes de la ville.

Et celles du poète
Qui, tous les soirs, libèrent de nouvelles étoiles
Et ouvrent tout grands les volets du songe.

(174)

In this passage, the poet, the previously exiled martyr figure, is no longer an artistic vessel of despair; on the contrary, he seems to be a hopeful figure. The final lines of the poem reinforce this idea, as they assert that all hands one day "S'envolent comme l'oiseau / Dans une parfaite ferveur de paumes enfin unies" (174). The hands, finally reunited, seem to reflect Després' own hopes for himself and Acadie.

The theme of reconciliation persists throughout *Le Balcon*, and often follows the well-established martyr figure. This figure seems to be attempting to overcome the past, namely past disputes with Acadie. "Je

suis descendu pour toi,” for example, appears to be an effort at communication:

Je suis descendu pour toi aux enfers des rythmes saccadés
Raison et logique sont des roses fanées
Je ne danse plus les tangos oubliés
Je rampe sur les ondes de mes rêves repliés.

(180)

In particular, the third line of this stanza, “Je ne danse plus les tangos oubliés,” implies that Després has left his feud with Acadian elitists in the past. In the final and titular poem of the collection, he even wonders if these “dieux inachevés” can do the same and turn towards love:

Vont-ils rendre à l’amour
Les tabernacles dérisoires du temps
Et tout le poids enchâssé de cette promesse
Enfin accomplie?

(193)

The end of the poem offers no clear resolution for the reader, and perhaps this open-endedness is what drives Raymond to assess this third collection as “un échec” and Pilon to classify it as “une aventure misérable” (qtd. in Raymond 2003, 76). By contrast to *Silences* and *Les Cloisons*, however, *Le Balcon* is certainly more hopeful for reconciliation, and even appears to be at its brink at times. This charitable reading of Després’ third collection of poetry is made convincing by the final two poems he publishes independently in 1972, “Mon Acadie” and “Nuit de la poésie acadienne.”¹¹

These two poems reflect the current events in Acadie at the time, such as the important poetry night and publication of *Cri de Terre*, while simultaneously speaking directly to Després’ own martyrdom and return to the modern Acadie he had envisioned in the late 1950s. One particular stanza in “Mon Acadie” communicates clearly these ideas:

Mon Acadie
Évangéline à pas feutrés
Aux yeux d’exil refoulé
Relève ses capuchons de mythe
Et tend ses bras aux nouveau-nés.

(201)

The images of the exiled figure of *Évangéline*, of removing the hoods of myth to embrace newborns—most likely in reference to poets such as LeBlanc—are striking in this case, especially within the context of this reading of Després' poetry from the late 1950s until 1972. For Després, and as he claims in "Nuit de la poésie acadienne," Acadie is "Un pays dévoré / Par un feu longtemps contenu" (202). Another articulation of this idea belongs to LeBlanc in his opening verse to "Cri de terre": "J'habite un cri de terre aux racines de feu" (55). With Després' final poems, therefore, readers bear witness to the completion of the poet's journey from exile to his return home. The last lines of poetry that Després writes thus stand as a testament to his literary works: "Tu es, mon Acadie / – Et sans douleur, cette fois – / Pays de partance" (203).

• • •

In the metaphorical sense, Ronald Després represents no less than the bridge between traditional and modern poetry in Acadie. While Lonergan defines Acadie in its movement towards modernity as "[u]n pays à inventer" (14), "réinventer" might be a more accurate term, given Després' important work in deconstructing an antiquated Acadian identity to voice a modern one. His works oppose over a century of literary traditions, which were established during a highly nationalistic time for Acadie, and pave the way for the next generation of poets in what has been called a neo-nationalist context. On the work done by Després and subsequent Acadian poets, Fred Cogswell states:

I envy these Acadian poets, who are able still to speak for themselves in their own way and at the same time speak in tune to most of their peers without violating the reality of their time and their place. I hope they may continue to keep their separate voices and adjure the inevitable unifying myth-making tendency to which art is prone for yet a little while longer — at least long enough to lay a sufficiently complex literary groundwork to build on as to ensure that no myths as simplistic as those of "Évangéline" and "the Lord's chosen people" will ever arise again in Acadia to support the inherent laziness of the human spirit. (65)

Therein lies Després' most important contribution to modern Acadian poetry: not the fight against Anglophone oppression, but the dismantling of dominant Acadian myths to give space to emerging voices. Després is involved literally in the transition, from his early fight for literary modernity at *L'Évangéline* to his presence at the poetry night in 1972, where he

ushers in a new wave of poets. LeBlanc's statement of his debt to Després' work, as well as Herménégilde Chiasson's illustration of *Paysages en contrebande...à la frontière du songe. Choix de poèmes (1956-1972)*, Després' last publication in 1974, are a testament to his lasting influence on Acadie and Acadian poetry.

Despite the significance of his works and key role in the transition between traditional and modern poetry in Acadie, Després remains mostly unread outside Maurice Raymond's studies on repressed homosexuality traced throughout the writer's works. This reading, however, provides an alternate discussion to Raymond's view on Després' exile, primarily within a larger context of his troubled relationship with Acadie and its elitists. While a number of critics dismiss Després due to the apparent lack of Acadian themes in his works, the "Acadian in exile" figure throughout his poetry is certainly deserving of more critical attention. The exile figure is a popular figure in Acadian literature, from Longfellow's *Evangeline* to Gérald LeBlanc's *Moncton Mantra* (1997). Furthermore, Després' seemingly triumphant return to Acadie anticipates similar characters in Acadian fiction, such as Pélagie in Antonine Maillet's *Pélagie-la-Charrette* (1979). Finally, while Després' works were perhaps considered too avant-garde at the time of their publication to be studied in an Acadian scope, contemporary scholars, with history on their side, may have the insight to examine Després and the meanings of his works within a broader context of Acadian literature.

Notes

- 1 The duration of the first Acadian renaissance varies among critics, beginning in 1864 for some and 1847 for others, publication date of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "Evangeline." See Belliveau n.p. Moreover, for a detailed summary of the national Acadian conventions that defined the first Acadian renaissance, see Bourque, et al. (2013).
- 2 For another articulation of Acadie's movement into modernity, see Fred Cogswell 62-65.
- 3 For Després' detailed biography and bibliography, see Cormier (2014).
- 4 See *L'Évangéline*.
- 5 See Lonergan for more details on "La Nuit de la poésie et de la chanson acadiennes," pp. 98-9, as well as Belliveau.
- 6 See Robert Viau for the complete interview.
- 7 For the remainder of the article, quotations from Després' poetry are taken from *À force de mystère: Œuvre poétique 1958-1974* (2009), which is an anthology comprising Després' three poetry collections and several poems published later in his life.
- 8 Raymond recounts and analyzes the fable of the king in Daigle's letter 89-90.

- 9 See Hamelin, LeBlanc, and Vachon in Raymond 79-80.
 10 “Attendu que” is the only poem published previously in *L'Évangéline* from this collection.
 11 See *Poésie acadienne*, published by *La Revue de l'Université de Moncton* (1972) and quoted in *À Force de mystère*, p. 206.

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