Recreating the World: Antonine Maillet's *The Tale of Don l'Orignal* as a perfect illustration of Bakhtin's theory of carnival

Dr. Denis Bourque
Full professor
Department of French Studies, University of Moncton
Moncton, New Brunswick
Canada
E-mail : denis.bourque@umoncton.ca

In 1970, two years following the publication of Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*, and the very year the French version of his *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics* was published, André Belleau identified strong connections between Quebec society and literature and the carnivalesque. "No Québécois reads Bakhtin's *Rabelais* without utter delectation. They find themselves in every line, practically[1]." Belleau was later to examine the existence of a carnivalesque culture and literature in Québec. Finding that elsewhere in the West, carnival culture had become diluted or had entirely disappeared, he stated that in Québec, as late as the nineteen seventies, it was still an integral part of social and literary life, preserving its power as a world concept that is opposite to the official, "serious" one. He credits this to the survival into the modern era of the Québécois popular culture. In 1970, Belleau may not have been too well-informed about the small nation spread out beyond Québec's eastern limits, which had one of the richest folklore in North America according to the ethnologist Luc Lacourcière. Nor did he know about a novice author named Antonine Maillet who was preparing a new literary oeuvre based on life in her native land, a body of work seeped in carnival and deeply inspired by the popular culture of Acadie.

If dreams could come true, we would wish that Bakhtin were still alive today and removed from the confinement imposed on him by an unjust and totalitarian regime. He might be interested in this Goncourt winner, a great admirer of Rabelais. We are convinced that had he been able to read *Don l'Orignal*, *Les Cordes-de-bois* or *Mariaagélas*, he too would have done so with "singular delectation", such are the riches of these works in parodic degradations, hierarchic reversals, dethronings and permutations of all kinds, and in parodic intertextuality as well. And he would have equally enjoyed reading the truly polyphonic novels *Pélagie-la-Charette* and *Cent ans dans les bois*. Personally our research has focused on the fertile relationship between the carnivalesque and the works of Antonine Maillet, and in this article, we have specifically examined the novel *The Tales of Don l'Orignal*.

It may be wise to review the Bakhtinian notion of "carnivalesque" and to outline its essential features. His is a complex concept, whose elements might initially seem quite heterogeneous. A summary definition of Bakhtin's idea of the "carnivalesque" refers to a particular world view that developed from Antiquity to the Middle Ages among the popular classes of all Western nations, as expressed in the countless forms, rites and symbols of the popular feast, in the language of the marketplace, as well as in a variety of literary genres diversely linked to these feasts. In the Renaissance period, due to historical contingencies that we will summarize as the decline in the powers of the state and the church together with the apparition of literature in the vernacular and the blurring of linguistic borders among various national groups, the folk concept of the world entered into all spheres of life and of official ideological thinking. This made it possible, Bakhtin tells us, for such authors as Rabelais, Cervantes and Dante to create great literary masterpieces. The most fundamental aspect of this world view, which also serves as its unifying principle, is laughter. The carnivalesque is the comic perception of mankind and of the world.

To understand this principle in all its depth, we have to go back in time to Antiquity, and more precisely to that period that precedes the rise of state government and the division of society into classes. In the folklore of primitive peoples, as Bakhtin points out, a double aspect of the world and of human life existed. Comic cults, which laughed and scoffed at the deity, were coupled with serious cults; serious myths with comic myths, and heroes had their parodic doublets. In the primitive mentality, the serious and the comic were intertwined in a single world view. In the Middle Ages, as state structures stabilized and the power of the dominant classes became entrenched, a marked separation was drawn between the serious and the comical modes of interpretation of reality.

[1] André Belleau, « Bakhtine et le multiple », *Études françaises*, vol. 4, no 6 (1970-71), p. 486.

Feudal and religious hierarchies, in their effort to reinforce and consolidate their authority, attempted to impose a single world view that would serve as universal dogma, establish a sole true vision of the world. Inevitably, this truth should be uncompromisingly serious, given that any class-based system can only rule by intimidation and coercion. At the pinnacle of the Middle Ages, state and religious seriousness wielded an extremely oppressive and even terrifying power. Bakhtin is particularly eloquent in describing the awesome and lugubrious seriousness of the Middle Ages:

> As opposed to laughter, medieval seriousness was infused with elements of fear, weakness, humility, submission, falsehood, hypocrisy, or on the other hand with violence intimidation, threats, prohibitions. As a spokesman of power, seriousness terrorised, demanded, and forbade. It therefore inspired people with distrust. Seriousness had an official tone and was treated like all that is official. It oppressed, frightened, bound, lied, and wore the mask of hypocrisy. Seriousness was avaricious, committed to fasts[2].

Progressively eliminated from every sphere of official existence, both religious and stately, laughter was appropriated by the people, who made it their own domain and the vehicle of a folk apprehension of the world. Laughter would be allowed to reign mightily within a determined time and space: feast days in the marketplace. There and then it acquired a universal quality and came to represent a second life for man in the Middle Ages, his way to escape, at least temporarily, the routine of everyday life, the fear that was very real and omnipresent in daily life, and all restrictions inherent to the feudal and theocratic system. That is the reason for the often unbridled nature of these feasts. Excluded from official life, laughter was made richer and deeper, and around it, a unique and particularly lucid world view coalesced.

During popular feasts - and especially during carnival, which Bakhtin considers the most complete and the purest expression of folk culture - all that was elevated and oppressive, everything related to the machinery of state or church was parodied and ridiculed, and thus stripped of its terror. Parody was usually a debasement. A king and queen were elected for fun and reigned as long as the feast lasted, fool ceremonies of enthronement and dethronement were held. There was a reversal of hierarchic levels: the fool could become the king. War was parodied in various clown wars, and during the feast of fools, the populace might elect an abbot, a bishop, or even a pretend pope. Some events were inescapably part of carnival: a huge banquet celebrated material and worldly abundance, and a feast of fire included the torching of a symbolic structure that was called "hell". Popular feasts gave rise to a particular language and an entire genre of parodic literature that was often integrated to the feast through readings or performances. For instance, parodies of the Old and the New Testament were presented with frequent transposition of episodes to the level of eating, drinking, reproducing and attending to nature's needs.

Indeed this entire parodic universe was linked to material and bodily life to some degree. Every form of elevated life and official ideology was degraded to the common plane, brought down to body and earth where they are no longer able to inspire fear. It follows from our preceding considerations that laughter in the marketplace during feasts is primarily satirical: it takes aim at the official truth and the official world, in an effort to denigrate and destroy them. However it would be a mistake, Bakhtin tells us, to assign such a restricted context to medieval popular laughter. In the Middle Ages, the popular feast remained powerfully linked to the antique feast, which was related to "the change of the seasons, to the phases of the sun and moon, to the death and renewal of vegetation, and to the succession of agricultural seasons[3]." As in the antique feast, the medieval feast is fundamentally related to biological and cosmic cycles. More than a temporary liberation from medieval fears and constraints, it is also a celebration of the unending renewal of the world and the cosmos.

The parodic degradations we discussed earlier really take on their full meaning within this conception of cyclic time. While they feast, people become aware of the joyous relativity of all things, even the current regime: it too is destined to die and disappear to make room for something new, something larger, something better. Degrading official truth and order towards the grossly material and the body takes on a profoundly ambivalent meaning in the context of the feast. Degrading the lofty to the level of the body and the earth is a way of destroying, of burying, since the earth stands for the corporeal tomb in the popular mind. Meanwhile the earth is also the corporeal womb, the nurturing mother who brings death even while she brings life. In Nature's great cycle, everything is destined to die, to return to the earth and be replaced through new births. Laughter degrades and destroys but it also renovates and rebuilds; it is decidedly oriented to the future. In this perspective, carnivalesque laughter becomes universal; not only does it target official truth and order, but also

[2] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, translated by Helene Iswolsky, Cambridge and London, The Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1968, p. 94.
[3] *Ibid.*, p. 81.

the whole universe, and it takes particular aim at the laughers themselves as part of this universe in constant transformation, perpetually evolving. The purpose of laughter, finally, is universal renewal. The popular feast of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, in letting man look forward to a better world, was profoundly utopian. Significantly, the climax of the carnival was the feast of fire. A pyre was built to stand for hell, the absolute lowest earth level, the inferno into which everything must be cast so that it may be destroyed and reborn. Symbolically, this blaze represents a worldwide fire that will lead to a new world. A few words must be said on the values ascribed by Bakhtin to the concept of the carnival in literature and intellectual pursuits generally. He writes:

> The principle of laughter and the carnival spirit (...) frees human consciousness, thought, and imagination for new potentialities. For this reason great changes, even in the field of science, are always preceded by a certain carnival consciousness that prepares the way[4].

In other words, to break through any of the great historical boundaries, whether in literature or intellectual pursuits, the world must be somewhat carnivalized in its rigid, incomplete and outdated aspects, so as to open the way to new realities. The grotesque realist form, according to Bakhtin, serves to "liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepeted[5]". He adds: "This carnival spirit offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things[6]." That being said, it is easy to understand Maillet's attraction for the carnivalesque: her constant and avowed aim has been to make over the world through writing. We are now able to complete the sketchy definition of the carnivalesque first provided. We will say that the carnivalesque is a specific world outlook that is expressed through the popular feasts of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, singularly during carnival. This concept implies a degradation and destruction, through laughter, of established truth and order, and eventually of all that exists, their renewal within the biocosmic cycle of the earth, and the perception of a new order and a new world in man's and society's future. This is the very outline of *Don l'Orignal*, undoubtedly the most carnivalesque of Antonine Maillet's works, which we will now examine more closely.

The novel *Don l'Orignal*, completed on February 14, 1967, was a sequel to the play *Les Crasseux* written by Maillet the year before, and featured nearly the same cast of characters and a similar plot. In the play, as staged and in most other aspects, a well-defined boundary separates two groups inhabiting a small Acadian village: the upper folk and the lower folk, the wealthy and the dispossessed, those exercising power and those subjected to it. *Don l'Orignal* presents quite similar circumstances but transposed, one might say to a higher, more universal plane. We now see two separate societies, two nations each with their own political and economic structures. The villagers'society is of course a bourgeoisie, a dominant society, contrasted with the people of Flea Island. At the start, it has a sure dominion over them, inasmuch as it holds power over the Islanders' very survival – represented by the barrel of molasses. Secondly, its mores, customs, and language are those of the elite, of power, and starkly contrasted in the novel with the Flea Islanders' mores, customs and language, which are folkish in nature. The author ascribes to the Villagers characteristics of true elite. They are representatives of order, duration, and stability; of morality, civilization and proper behaviour.

As the author has it, they are a ''civilized'' nation that has been "made respectable by centuries of culture[7]". They inhabit a ''steadfast land, held firm by centuries of sound manners, honourable traditions, solid virtues – an old, refined and highly moral civilization[8]." It can be said of the Villagers that they represent all that is ordered, sacred and fixed. The Islanders, by contrast, represent spontaneity, disorder, change, and growth. They live on "soft soil[9]", an unset land. They were born suddenly from their island and evolved very rapidly. The dissimilarity between the Villagers – as representatives of duration and stability – and the Flea Islanders – as representatives of spontaneity and growth – is especially well drawn in this paragraph describing the birth of the Flea nation:

> The little island rapidly grew in importance. For nothing is peopled as quickly as an isolated, barren land, neglected by everyone, since good lands remain by right the lot of the upper class, that uncommon and scattered species so scrupulously called the elite. Thus, in less time than it would take to establish a respectable family on the firm soil of the mainland, the soft soil of the island had engendered a nation[10].

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 49.
[5] *Ibid.*, p. 34.
[6] *Ibid.*
[7] Antonine Maillet, *The Tale of Don l'Orignal*, translated by Barbara Godard, Toronto and Vancouver, Clarke, Irwin & Company Limited, 1978 ; Fredericton, Goose Lane Editions, 2004, p. 8.
[8] *Ibid.*, p. 71.
[9] *Ibid.*, p. 10.
[10] *Ibid.*

The Villagers' standard of life includes a taste for all that is most delicate and most contrived. They are ''fine men[11]''. They eat plum-pudding, goose liver pâté, cheese pie. They play bridge, they wear corsets, collars and lace. And they speak in a congealed, static, sterile manner, in perfectly correct, quasi-literary English. The Flea Islanders, on the other hand, are fond of the good life, of celebration, eating and drinking, in which they indulge outrageously, of tales, stories, parodic performances, cross-dressing, laughter, joy, music. The writer adroitly summarizes these aspects in a description she provides of the people of Flea Island:

> Don l'Orignal and his people were all men of hearty constitution and sound digestion. More than anyone else in those days, these merry fellows loved to eat hearty and drink deep. And when they had done both well, they showed the greatest capacity for joy and excess ever encountered in the entire eastern part of the country.
> Accordions began to pump, violins to screech, feet to beat boards, and throats to bawl out all the charming nonsense that heated brains can come up with[12].

And for their part, the Flea Islanders speak a rich and highly coloured language, a living, folksy, down-to-earth, popular English. So we can say that the Flea Island culture is an excellent representation of the carnival culture: we have seen that its realm is laughter, joy, parody, travesty, good food and drink, and wild talk. It is our view that the villagers, in turn, represent the world's too-serious face that must be cheered up, its pretence and false verities that must be unmasked, its moral, spiritual and political order that must be overturned and brought down to the ground so that a new order can emerge. As the novel evolves, the rigid, ordered and closeted world of the Villagers is indeed overrun, or even contaminated, and carnivalized by the world of the Islanders. A carnivalesque disorder gradually invades the world of the Villagers, first shaking its foundations, then upsetting it thoroughly, bringing low its loftiness. Its social structure is entirely reversed, with an absolute permutation of hierarchical positions. This comes about through the destruction of Flea Island by fire, which in the novel figures as a worldwide fire that will renew the world and allow a glimpse into a better world thereafter. And indeed it comes to pass that after the destruction of Flea Island, the village population finds itself "renewed...completely renewed[13]'', and ''a new people[14]'' is born in a new and different location , a "vigorous developing world[15]'' brought forth by Citrouille and Adéline, with its sights firmly set on the future.

We will return to these transformations within the novel later. At this point, without delving too deeply, we wish to emphasize the omnipresence of degrading parody in the novel, mainly responsible for infusing the work with its specific climate – merry, funny, derogatory, in a word carnivalesque – which will provide the setting for the overthrow of the Village society and the renewal of the characters' universe. First to be underscored in this exploration is the extensive use of intertextual parody in the novel, woven from both the Bible and chivalric romance. The author's description of the nation of Flea Island – its outfits, its behaviour and its discourse – is a vast parody of the feudal state and the ideals of chivalry. The king of Flea Island, Don l'Orignal, is comically, almost clownishly, turned out: "a horned colossus, bearded and hairy[16]''. His regal paraphernalia draws him close to earth – towards animals, vegetation and soil even – and are degrading in the extreme. His crown is a fur cap; his shoulders are covered with a deer hide and his legs with pigskin boots.

A spruce bough serves as his sceptre and a tree-stump as his throne. Chivalric fidelity and aristocratic titles are parodied in the author's presentation of La Sagouine: she is the ''faithless companion of Michael-Archange, the king's armour bearer[17]'' and the daughter of one of the most famous men in the kingdom ''Jos à Pit à Boy à Thomas Picoté Viens-que-je-t'arrache[18]''. Tellingly, La Sagouine always carries a mop around, a lowly object that references the floor. Feats of chivalry are similarly parodied. La Sagouine's father was "attributed the most illustrious deeds ever dreamed of by valiant knights[19].'' Meanwhile one of his most glorious gestures was to sequester his mother-in-law, whose screams are compared to those of a stuck pig, ''in an abandoned potato cellar[20].'' References to an underground location, to pigs and to death are each a form of parodic degradation of chivalry's most esteemed achievements. This incident closes on a still more degrading quip and a slap, a humiliating gesture if ever there was one:

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 106.
[12] *Ibid.*, p. 80.
[13] *Ibid.*, p. 111.
[14] *Ibid.*, p. 113.
[15] *Ibid.*
[16] *Ibid.*, p. 10.
[17] *Ibid.*, p. 15.
[18] *Ibid.*
[19] *Ibid.*
[20] *Ibid.*

> ‘‘Next time, gag er up, too, cause she’s a bitch who’s always getting round us, either with er big mouth or...’’
> But the rest of the sentence was swept away by a slap from the tender woman, who had not left all of her strength in the cellar[21].

Similarly, Noume is a “champion” who ‘‘already had many deeds to his credit[22]”. These are not feats of glory however but refer to the valiant knight’s sexual and amorous prowess. This intertextual parody also extends to the Bible. For instance, a biblical pageant is trotted out as part of the celebration of Citrouille’s resurrection, its description prefaced by references to the body, the belly, and the abundance of food and drink: “Don l’Original and his people were all men of hearty constitution and sound digestion. More than anyone else in those days, these merry fellows loved to eat hearty and drink deep[23].” A carnival atmosphere is created at the start of the account of a performance which is a genuine travesty of Biblical stories, as a brawling and drunken bunch of Flea Islanders impersonate various biblical characters. Degradation is also directed to the realm of sex and love, when La Cruche, a prostitute, plays the parts of Eve and Ruth. The entire scene is truly carnivalesque in its mood: “This biblical pageant took place amidst shouting matches, applause, clinking of jugs, and the swaying of a crowd drunk with joy and dandelion wine[24].” Having ascertained the presence of degrading parody in an intertextual reading of *Don l’Orignal*, we can now turn to other important aspects of the human thinking and activity that are Religion, War, Science, and Politics.

Prayer seems to be particularly targeted. In the royal chapel, Don l’Orignal and La Sainte address God in a language that is extremely familiar: ‘‘God the Father,’’ she said piously, ‘‘it’s ya I’m talking to. Mind ya don’t pretend ya don’t hear me[25].’’ The prayer intensifies to such heights that La Sainte, in a frenzy, starts to scream, gets her words mixed up and ends up with a totally incoherent petition to God: ‘‘Bless us above all women by yer son Jesus, fruit of our wombs[26]’’, an evident travesty of the Hail Mary. Similarly the prayer for the dead, recited in Latin, also founders in incoherence and becomes the target for parody. While Citrouille’s funeral was being conducted,

> They were vaguely aware of crying something or other from the depths of the abyss […] and that a sacrifice would be made of a holocaust or a helicopter, it wasn’t quite clear which. *Dies illa, dies irae, quescat aeternam Domine, R.I.P.*[27].

The scene that follows is a degrading parody of the funeral rites and the appurtenances of the religious ceremonial. The solemn procession of the Flea Islanders is soon transformed into a free for all when the dead man arises and the whole religious apparatus is thrown to sea. In another episode, the mayor dreams a degrading parody of war. It is of a prophetic nature since it foreshadows the invasion of the Villagers’ world by the Islanders’ world, which occurs at the end of the novel, and the two armies it depicts in conflict bear the features of each of the nations. But the opponents are here reduced to miniature wooden soldiers fighting with exceedingly laughable implements: ‘‘pencils, rulers, pens, hairpins, and toothbrushes[28]’’. And the battle more closely resembles a carnivalesque riot than a real war. ‘‘[T]he army on the left’’, the author tells us, ‘‘looked like a gang of Carthaginian mercenaries, pushing, swearing, fighting among themselves, tripping, and thumbing their noses at each other[29]’’.

Similarly, the glorious Samic wars (from the character Sam Amateur) can be more or less summed up as two army leaders fighting tooth and nail, a kind of carnivalesque brawl attended by delirious troops as a form of entertainment: ‘‘Everybody howled, spat, clapped, and chopped the air with their arms, swearing by all the devils of hell and Flea Island[30]’’. The war trophy is itself a perfectly degrading parody: La Cruche’s petticoat that here represents both the lower body and sexuality. The story of Citrouille’s resurrection is a degrading parody of science. First the schoolmaster’s scientific passion is misinterpreted by the nursing sister as a sign of unbridled sexual desire. The embalming has little to do with science – it is done in the most empirical fashion with utterly ill-assorted objects. When the deceased comes back to life, science and the schoolmaster are both degraded into diabolical elements and the embalmers head for the sea, bringing to mind the flight of the stunned Flea Islanders:

[21] *Ibid.*, p. 16.
[22] *Ibid.*, p. 17.
[23] *Ibid.*, p. 80.
[24] *Ibid.*, p. 81.
[25] *Ibid.*, p. 40.
[26] *Ibid.*, p. 41.
[27] *Ibid.*, p. 77.
[28] *Ibid.*, p. 13.
[29] *Ibid.*
[30] *Ibid.*, p. 31.

‘‘When his mixture of herbs started bringing dead back to life, things were beginning to smell of Beelzebub. And, leaving the ghost in the lurch, the two undertakers fled the enchanted island as fast as they could row[31]’’. Eventually, politics falls prey to parody as well. The blasphemous exclamation ‘‘Godalmightyhellfire[32]!’’ serves as Don l’Orignal’s entire speech from the Throne and the heated debate among the Islanders turns into a real shivaree, which the author compares to the debates in a House of Commons: “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[33].” These degrading parodies of Religion, War, Science and Politics, together with the parodic intertextuality we have pointed out earlier, generate the novel’s specific climate, a carnivalesque ambiance that gradually and inevitably seeps into the world of the mainlanders. Our first hint of this seepage of carnival into the bourgeois world is the mayor’s dream. She sees the Island army enlarging progressively, overrunning the whole space and soon spreading throughout the world, ‘‘invading the whole room, making the walls crack, spreading out into the village, into the fields, along the shoreline, flooding the land and water with its warlike wrath[34]’’.

This invasion by the Flea Islanders and the carnivalesque actually begins with the capture of the molasses barrel and is emphasised by Adeline’s initial capture and the arrival on bourgeois soil of the Islanders who request a piece of land where they can bury Citrouille. Village society, already disrupted by the barrel snatch, is now totally upset and tumbles downward: ‘‘The whole village […] was now in complete confusion, upside down, pell-mell, head first in an anarchic state without head or tail[35]’’.

This carnivalization of the bourgeois world reaches a kind of climax at the party given by the schoolmaster. As with the popular feast discussed earlier, this celebration features every kind of excess, and consequently, the teacher’s house is the setting of appropriately carnivalesque mayhem and destruction:

> When the schoolmaster came back from the woods in the wee hours of the morning, he stopped, glued to his doorstep, open-mouthed in front of a breathtaking sight. Flea Island was there, floating over the furniture, the floor, the landing – a scene of pillage like a wave of Tartars would have left. Then, from the depths of a battered arm chair, he heard the voice of Michel-Archange. “He’s a jolly good fellow, the teacher…[36]”

Following the Islanders’ raid, the village people get ready for war. Adeline’s second abduction provides the trigger for an invasion of Flea Island by the Mainlanders and its destruction by fire. This fire can be linked to the carnival pyre both because it paves the way for the universal renewal that is clearly laid out at the end of the novel, and because it rages at the same time as Citrouille’s wedding is being uproariously celebrated. It will be noted that this feast has a marked relationship with time, as does carnival, and especially with the future. This is how the author describes the wedding party’s return to Flea Island, which the townspeople have set ablaze: “The Flea Islanders laughed and shouted, heedless of the weather, the world, and eternal life. Only the present counted for them, filled with forgotten memories and bearing an unknown future[37].” This image of the present time “bearing an unknown future”, which is immediately correlated in the story with the death of Flea Island, can be read as an image of death giving birth, a core image of the carnivalesque view of the world.

After their island is destroyed, the Flea nation invades the mainland once and for all, bringing about a further reversal of the village order and its thorough renewal: “Everything in the village was topsy turvy. […] [T]his population moreover had been renewed…completely renewed[38].” An eyewitness to this upheaval is now credited with the story as it unfolds to the end; he realizes that the entire mainland hierarchy has been turned topsy-turvy and the mayor ousted from her throne. Taking over their role are La Sagouine, La Sainte and the rest of the Flea Island nation:

> He didn’t recognize the famous mayor who had made a whole continent tremble, but in her place reigned a squealing gossip who continually pushed an arsenal of mops, buckets, and dust rags in front of her. He could not find the milliner any more, but instead a sort of modest ascetic by the name of La Sainte who put herself through the worst contortions to prove that she hadn’t usurped her name.

[31] *Ibid.*, p. 75-76.
[32] *Ibid.*, p. 19.
[33] *Ibid.*, p. 19.
[34] *Ibid.*, p. 13.
[35] *Ibid.*, p. 72.
[36] *Ibid.*, p. 86.
[37] *Ibid.*, p. 105.
[38] *Ibid.*, p. 110-111.

> Similarly, he looked in vain for the barber, the banker, the merchant, and the schoolmaster. This entire elite had given way to a tribe of hairy and bearded creatures, spitting thick and fast and swearing by all the devils in hell[39].

The narrator describes an all-inclusive permutation of the social structure from the upper reaches to the lowliest and from the lesser to the lofty. The mainlanders with their ‘‘high culture and strong tradition[40]’’ are brought closer to the earth, no longer ‘‘cultivating the art of sauces and hors d’oeuvres[41]’’ but getting nourishment from Island produce. Their mansions are transformed into thatched cottages and they gradually become Flea Islanders. The Flea Islanders, for their part, become the new middle class, bedecked with the trappings of the former Villagers and accessing the ‘‘mysteries of civilization[42]’’:

> One fine day, La Sagouine crossed the market square turning up a proud stiff collar of lace. The next day, La Sainte covered her long arms in long gloves and rolled her long fingers around a silk purse. […]
> Slowly the world was changing, upsetting class structure, civilizing the barbarians and barbarizing the civilized[43].

Bakhtin’s words are precisely relevant to this transformation: “One of the indispensable elements of the folk festival was travesty, that is, the renewal of clothes and of the social image. Another essential element was a reversal of the hierarchic levels[44].” While the old world is being changed and renewed, “a new people[45]” is growing on a tiny fir-covered island, a nation begotten by Citrouille and Adeline, themselves the scions of the two former nations. This is a new and vibrant civilization that is determinedly turned to the future. This is how the author represents the new society: “The tribe of Citrouilles cultivated and exploited its island, a hardy and vigorous developing world. Every morning the young Citrouilles looked proudly ahead at the infinite sheet of water and the future.” The novel concludes on Citrouille and Adeline watching the sun go down over the old world, an image of its end and a promise for the future. The world of Mainlanders and Islanders has been renewed by carnivalesque laughter and fire but it fades away at the end of the novel – as must happen in a carnivalesque view of the world – to make way for something better, to give us a glimpse of a new world to come that Citrouille and Adeline are now building.

We have touched but lightly on a few elements of a piece that can justifiably be called eminently carnivalesque. In conclusion we might want to briefly question the reason for the carnivalesque in the novel. Influences are clearly discerned: Rabelais, of course, but Cervantes too, and also the folk culture of Acadie itself. But this does not explain away the love of Maillet for Renaissance authors and for this popular culture. Bakhtin, we think, provides us with part of the answer. Any rise of the carnivalesque in literature, in his view, is related to eras of great historical upheavals. Specific works and specific writers, he says,

> reflect essentially and deeply the great moments of crisis in world history. These writers deal with an uncompleted, changing world, filled with the disintegrating past and with the as yet unformed future. A peculiar positive and one might say objective incompleteness is inherent in these writings[46].

And so, these are precisely the times where folk culture, with its emphasis on forward direction, “with its conception of an uncompleted being and gay time (has) a powerful influence on great literature[47]”. Might not Maillet be, in relation to Acadie at least, one of these writers that describe a world in transformation, the end of an outdated world order and the arrival of a new one? This is our view. Might we not characterize Maillet as a pivotal writer, one who realises the transition between Acadie’s traditional and timeless oral literature and a literature that is even now gaining ground among modern literatures?

[39] *Ibid.*, p. 111.
[40] *Ibid.*
[41] *Ibid.*, p. 112.
[42] *Ibid.*
[43] *Ibid.*
[44] Mikhail Bakhtin, *op. cit.*, p. 81.
[45] Antonine Maillet, *op. cit.*, p. 113.
[46] Mikhail Bakhtin, *op. cit.*, p. 127.
[47] *Ibid.*, footnote 67.