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Victor-Lévy Beaulieu and Québec's Linguistic and Cultural Identity Struggle

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Victor-Lévy Beaulieu and Québec's Linguistic and Cultural Identity Struggle

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Six months ago, the latest literary work from Québécois author Victor-Lévy Beaulieu came off the presses. Known by his fans as simply VLB, Beaulieu is considered to be among the greatest contemporary Québec writers,¹ and this most recent work, *La Grande tribu*, marks his seventieth. He directly threw it into a wood stove. Beaulieu's book-burning followed a comment made by current *Parti Québécois* leader, Pauline Marois, who suggested that the teaching of English be added to Québec's elementary school curriculum. Beaulieu then threatened to burn the entire body of his works if nothing were done to curb the surge of bilingualism in Québec.²

Since the appearance of his first novel, *Mémoires d'outre-tonneau*³ in 1968, VLB has written more than twenty-five novels as well as works for television, radio, journals, newspapers and the stage. Labeled “une institution” (166) by Québécois historian Laurent Mailhot, VLB has played a vital role in the nationalist and separatist movements of Québec which arose out of *La Révolution tranquille*⁴ [The Quiet Revolution]. He has been a loud, even militant voice in Québec's sovereignty movement over the last forty years and has said that for him, it is “impossible de séparer son oeuvre

¹See Don Macpherson's February 28, 2008 editorial, “Book-burning shows Marois is in Trouble Quote of the Day.”

² See Noah Richler's article, “VLB wants to knock my teeth out,” based on his interview with Beaulieu.

³ In the *Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume 53: Canadian Writers Since 1960, First Series*, Eva-Marie Kröller notes that Beaulieu disowns this novel. This is interesting, considering the many similarities, both in plot and characters, between it and his most recent, *La Grand tribu*. I was unable to find any further information on this topic at the time this paper was written.

⁴ The Quiet Revolution marks a time of great and rapid change in Québec's history. It will be discussed in much further detail later on in this paper.

du sort du Québec" (Laurin, 2) [impossible to separate his work from the destiny of Québec].⁵ In a recent edition of *La Presse*, journalist Chantal Guay paraphrases Beaulieu's current separatist sentiments in light of Marois's pronouncement: "Il estime qu'il n'y a plus de parti indépendantiste et que si le Québec devient un district bilingue, ce sera la disparition de la nation québécoise francophone" (qtd. in Serge-André Guay 1) [He feels that there is no longer a sovereigntist party, and that if Québec becomes a bilingual district, the Québécois francophone nation will disappear].

Currently, there is much cultural debate over Beaulieu's seemingly extreme, symbolic ultimatum. Many would agree that VLB's political demonstration reflects the sentiments of a significant number of Québécois, still concerned with the dilution of their language, the assimilation of their culture, and their struggle to become a sovereign nation. Radio-Canada editor Danielle Laurin insists that VLB is "un homme résolu à sortir son peuple de la schizophrénie collective (2) [a man resolved to lifting his people out of a collective schizophrenia], and that while it is true that he is "obsédé de ses racines [. . .] il fouille le passé, pour mieux éclairer le présent, et regarder vers l'avenir" (ibid) [obsessed with his roots, he delves into the past, in order to shed light on the present, and look toward the future]. There are others, however, who believe VLB's politics to be outmoded, that the author, as Don MacPherson put it in his February 28, 2008 editorial page in Montreal's *The Gazette*, is one of those "intolerant, old-line nationalists who have fallen out of touch with Québécois' concerns."

In order to understand what these concerns are (for they are certainly various and divergent), and why it is exactly that Beaulieu has burned a work he spent thirty-five years writing, it is important to be familiar with Québec's past. This past reveals a tumultuous, two-hundred-and-fifty-year history of two colonial powers within one territory living in a state of linguistic duality. This

⁵ All translations in this work are mine unless they are titles, or are otherwise noted.

⁶ "Quebecer" is the Anglicized word for "Québécois." As a matter of personal choice, I employ the French word throughout this paper.

history will provide a context for Beaulieu's work; in turn, through an analysis of Beaulieu's first and most recent novels, we may gain a better understanding of the evolution of Québec's unique linguistic and cultural identity struggle and insight into the province's future.

It was in 1532 that French explorer Jacques Cartier sailed up the Saint Lawrence River and claimed what is now Canada for the French. Attempts to settle the territory now called Québec⁷ began in earnest around 1608. For over one hundred and fifty years, French settlers calling themselves *les Canadiens* inhabited this territory, along with various sedentary and nomadic aboriginal peoples. Then, in 1759, the British conquered the French colony of New France during the Seven Years' War. The Treaty of Paris ceded this colony to them four years later, and the Province of Québec was formed.

Not thirty years after its formation, the province of Québec was divided into the primarily British Upper Canada and French-dominated Lower Canada. This partition, facilitated through the British Act of 1791, created a border that would presumably "separate the two societies and prevent ethnic conflict" (qtd. in Levine 26).⁸ Ethnic conflict between the two provinces persisted, however. British business merchants still controlled Lower Canada's unelected executive and legislative councils. Complex tensions caused by administrative incompetence, political favoritism and manipulations, economic disenfranchisement and linguistic turmoil all reached a pitch. In 1833, during his notable address to the *Chambre d'assemblée de Québec*, *Parti patriote* leader, Joseph Papineau, said of the situation in Lower Canada:

Pour moi, ce que je désire, c'est un gouvernement composé d'amis des lois, de la

⁷The name comes from the Algonquin, or North American aboriginal, word meaning "a narrow passage or strait" (Monroe 1).

⁸In *The Reconquest of Montreal*, Mark Levine explains that British immigrants and English-speaking loyalists (Americans) "had little interest in even [...] mild cultural pluralism [...], and clamored for an entirely English-speaking socio-political environment. The British authorities responded, in 1791, by dividing Canada into two provinces: Upper Canada (homogeneously British and Protestant) and Lower Canada (predominantly French and Catholic)" (26).

liberté, de la justice, d'hommes qui protègent indistinctement tous les citoyens, qui leur accordent à tous les mêmes privilèges. J'aime et j'estime les hommes sans distinction d'origine, mais je hais ceux qui, descendants altiers des conquérants, viennent dans notre pays nous contester nos droits politiques et religieux. (qtd. in *La Grande tribu*, Beaulieu 580)

[As for myself, what I desire is a government composed of friends of law, of liberty, of justice, of men who indiscriminately protect all citizens, who accord them all the same privileges. I care for men, and hold them in esteem without making distinctions because of their origins, but I despise those who, haughty descendants of conquerors, come in our country and challenge our political and religious rights.]

The assembly rejected outright Papineau and the *Parti patriote's* demands for economic equality and just political representation.⁹ Thus, in 1837, Papineau led the French-Canadians in both a boycott against all British imports and in an armed, unsuccessful rebellion known as the Rebellion of 1837. As a result of these actions, the British declared Martial Law, and offered a reward for the arrest of Papineau. The Rebellion of 1837 was shortly followed by another, also unsuccessful, in 1838.

In response to these rebellions, the British Empire sent one of their high-ranking civil servants, Lord Durham, "to examine the reasons for the conflict and to propose some solution to it" (Warren 67). In what was a surprising conclusion, Durham remarked, "I expected to find a contest between a government and a people: I found two nations warring in the bosom of a single state: I found a struggle, not of principles, but of races, . . . two races, so long habituated to regard each other with hereditary enmity, and so differing in habits, language, and in laws" (qtd. in Warren 67). His report recommended that Britain begin to "marginalize the French group with massive English immigration" (Warren 69) and commence "the process of assimilation to English habits" (qtd. in

⁹ Papineau outlined his demands in an exhaustive list known as "Les 92 Résolutions."

Levine 28). In 1840, following the recommendations of Lord Durham's report, the British proclaimed the Act of the Union. This act abolished the legislatures of both Upper and Lower Canada and English became the Legislature's sole official language of record; the use of French was prohibited.

The French language proscription in the newly merged Province of Canada was unsuccessful, however. The French-Canadians still represented a majority of the population. It was only nine years later that all official restriction on the use of French were lifted.

In the 1860s, delegates from the Britain colonies of North America¹⁰ came together to discuss the formation of a new confederation. Seven years later, the British North American Act brought together most of these provinces. The Province of Canada was divided as it had previously been, into what were the former Upper and Lower Canadas, and which became, respectively, the Provinces of Ontario and Québec.

While French-Canadians gained several rights between 1849 and 1960, including the ability to run the provincial political system that protected French-Canadian religious, educational and legal institutions, visible disparities between the two cultures remained. Anglophones continued to dominate Québec's economy, and there was an understanding, "codified to some extent in 1876 by the BNA Act, that the status of the English language in public life and the autonomy of the Anglophone institutions were untouchable" (Levine 30). For one hundred years, with Francophones refusing to assimilate, and Anglophones holding onto the top rung of the linguistic hierarchy, little changed concerning language policy in Québec. Then suddenly, in the 1960s, Montréal began to witness a "Francophone cultural renaissance" (Levine 43). "The number of Francophones living in metropolitan Montréal doubled between 1931 and 1961, reaching 40 percent

¹⁰ These included Canada, Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick.

of Quebec's French-speaking population" (ibid). This surge of urban growth sparked a dramatic change in Québec's linguistic and cultural climate, giving birth to a nationalist spirit that would affect all of Canada. This cultural burgeoning is known as the *La Révolution tranquille* [The Quiet Revolution].

On July 22, 1960, Jean Lesage took the seat as Premier of Québec, under the famous *Parti libéral* slogan, "Maîtres chez nous" [Masters in our own house], the slogan that expressed the will of the Québécois to "reprendre possession de leur économie et de contrôler leur destin politique" (Nardocchio 343) [take back possession of their economy and to control their political destiny]. The period of history that marks The Quiet Revolution corresponds to Lesage's term of office, from 1960-1966.

The decline of Montréal as Canada's economic center marks only one of several phenomena characterizing The Quiet Revolution. In 1959, the opening of the Saint Lawrence Seaway allowed ocean-going vessels to "by-pass the Port of Montréal, reducing the city's status as Canada's transportation hub" (Levine 42), but even before this American corporations had begun to set up Canadian headquarters in Toronto, due to "the economic development of the western provinces and America's Midwestern industrial belt" [ibid]. Due to this economic restructuring, an important support to Anglophone power in Montréal was removed. As Québec watched its Anglophone financial elites invest outside of the province, French-Canadians began to question the English-speaking community's role in managing Québec's economy. The most unprecedented blow to the Anglophones' economic stronghold, though, came with the nationalization of Québec's electricity in 1962. "Anglophones still controlled over 80 percent of the energy sector through the early 1960s" (47), but then, when the provincial government bought out the remainder of Québec's private power companies, the resulting, nationalized Hydro-Québec served as a notice that "the subordinate status of Francophones in the Quebec economy" (ibid) was coming to an end.

Another major change that took place during The Quiet Revolution was the rapid secularization of society. Up to this point, French-Canadian survival had been predicated on traditional Roman Catholic ideologies of rural, isolated living, and high birthrates. This latter phenomenon especially, known as "the revenge of the cradles" (Warren 71), called for French-Canadians to have as many babies as possible in order to surpass the Anglophones in number and thus make assimilation and discrimination against French-Canadians more difficult. The revenge of the cradles did much to combat British immigration around the turn of the nineteenth century, with the French-Canadians having "a birthrate 20 per cent higher than their English compatriots" (ibid). However, with urban Montréal replacing rural Québec as the French-Canadian cultural center, "much of the traditionalism that characterized the past was replaced by increasingly liberal attitudes; long standing demographic tendencies, associated with a traditional rural way of life [...], were rapidly reversed" (Bélanger 1). This massive-scale secularization of French-Canadian society is evidenced by the provincial government's take-over of the healthcare and education systems, which had been under the control of the Roman Catholic Church, and by the subsequent decrease in French-Canadian birthrates which coincided with the increased availability of birth-control and a disregard for the Church's opposition to it.

Government reforms, the creation of Francophone institutions for health, education and welfare, the realignment of Québec into opposing federalist and separatist factions, Québec's changing social structure and the emergence of a new middle class, along with the above religious and economics factors, all contributed to changing the face of Québec during the 1960s. Underlying all of these developments, however, was the politicization of the French language. Continuing long past 1966, this most defining characteristic of The Quiet Revolution, the question of language, also became, and remains, Québec most pervasive identity challenge.

As the church's ideology of *la survivance* [survival] became outmoded in Québec, a new nationalist identity was born. In Montréal's urban setting, "English-language influences were infinitely stronger than in the homogeneously Francophone parishes of rural Quebec; thus, the continued survival and *épanouissement* [blossoming] of the French language and culture would seem to require confronting the status of English in Montreal" (Levine 43). One of the ways Québec Francophones addressed this requirement was to discontinue speaking of themselves as French-Canadian, and instead refer to themselves as Québécois. This linguistic paradigm shift identified Francophone Canadians "more by the province of the first colonists than by that of the country of Canada" (Fabbi 6), and radically demonstrated "Quebec's determination to shape its own future as a geopolitical entity" (Moss 82).

The roots of this nationalist identity went much deeper than exchanging ethnic titles. As French-Canadians shifted their ideologies away from Roman Catholicism, and thus its social and educational services, Canada "saw language become the main ingredient of the identity of Québec's French-Canadians" (Coulombe 80). The key aim of the nationalist movement then became to provide Québec's French-speaking majority, and thus the French language "with expressive power over the public sphere" (Coulombe 68), not an easy task to achieve, given that "within the Quebec economy and society on the one hand, and within federal institutions on the other" (MacMillian 90-91), the Québécois had been denied full access to this power for two hundred years. The fact that the majority of Canada's population outside of Québec is English-speaking promised to be an additional hurdle in the development of an equal language partnership through federal language policy.

In his discussion of Québec's economic conditions prior to The Quiet Revolution, when English-Canadian and American capital was still significantly invested inside the province, Mark Levine tells us that this time "was characterized by [...] the eviction of the French Canadians from

commanding positions in the business world" (76), and that, because of English-Canada's economic domination of the French-speaking community, a "system of linguistic dualism" had been created that "logically promoted the degradation of the French language and risked leading, sooner or later, to its final collapse" (53). Documentation provided by the Royal Bilingual and Bicultural Commission just after the Quiet Revolution showed that "Francophones experienced a long history of disadvantages and occasionally outright discrimination concerning their language" (MacMillan 91), and that

French-Canadians were under-represented [in the work place] compared to their share of the national population [...] and that they were concentrated in the lower echelons of the departmental public service, such that, the higher the position level, the smaller the percentage of Francophones [...]. Beyond that, only 9 per cent of positions were designated bilingual, a strong indicator of the limited commitment to providing government service in French. (ibid)

It was exactly this type of linguistic discrimination that the nationalist movement aimed to eradicate during The Quiet Revolution. It also exacted that the Québécois be recognized as a distinctive presence within Canada, and that French, the language of Québec's majority and the defining characteristic of the Québécois identity, be protected. The agenda of The Quiet Revolution was nothing less than, as Levine puts it, "a movement to dislodge the Anglophone elite", "to abandon a bilingualism that was fundamentally unequal" (Levine 40, 52-53), and to reconquer "Montreal as the metropole of French-speaking Quebec" (ibid).

With the huge influx of Francophones into Montréal between the 1930s--1960s came an "*ébullition culturelle*" (43), a cultural exuberance whereby Québécois poets, authors, journalists, playwrights, publishers, political and linguistic intellectuals all contributed to the creation of a new Francophone identity separate from outmoded French-Canadian rural traditions and religious

institutions, and from Anglophone institutions and English-language subjugation. This new creative class strengthened Québec's burgeoning nationalism by bringing the French voice and the Québécois experience to a mass audience, expressing the sentiments, frustrations and aspirations of a culture in search of a nation. One of these new voices was author Victor-Lévy Beaulieu, a young, prolific writer who, forty years later, is still expressing the concerns of the Québécois.

In an interview with *Le Devoir* in 1968, Beaulieu stated that *Mémoires d'outre-tonneau*¹¹ [Memoirs from Beyond the Cask], his first publication, was "une allégorie de la révolte" [an allegory of revolt]. The type of revolt he alludes to, however, is at first glance difficult to decipher. Replete with base language and crude, misogynistic ideologies, this absurdist novel could easily be dismissed as a juvenile story of self-destructive, hate-filled existential angst. By understanding the framework within which it was written, however, we can discover in *Mémoires* an allegory of revolt that alludes to, generally, an all-pervading sense of cultural and societal alienation and, specifically, the national linguistic identity crisis happening in Québec at this time.

The story begins with the main character, Satan Belhumeur, telling his audience how he came to be banished from the fictional Québécois village of Petit-Gibet after a bout of lude behaviors including exhibitionism and public masturbation. A grotesque, absurdist character -- indeed "protagonist" would be too fine a word for he whom popular Montréal newspaper *Le Devoir* has labeled "ce jeune homme un peu fasciste" (Major 1) [this slightly fascist young man] --, Satan sets the scene by divulging that yesterday he was walking the streets of Petit-Gibet with "une lanterne dans une main et mon pénis dans l'autre" (11) [a lantern in one hand and my penis in the other]. In this scene, Satan compares his lifestyle to that of the ancient Greek philosopher Diogenes, "qui était aussi laid et aussi dégoûtant que moi" (ibid) [who was as ugly and disgusting as me].

¹¹ The title of this novel refers to Chateaubriand's book, *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*. A comparison between these two works is beyond the scope of this paper.

Diogenes, who rejected common notions of human decency and who was reviled for his dog-like behaviors, was an exile and outcast, like Satan Belhumeur. The next morning, Satan, now banished from the village, wanders the barren countryside, emaciated, dirty and society-less. He waits, making no attempt to flee the punishment for his crimes, which the vengeful women of Petit-Gibet, who intend to castrate Satan and hang him up to die at the church, will soon dole out.

One of the ways Beaulieu represents Québec's general sense of cultural alienation is through the narration of Satan Belhumeur who, as an exile, sits looking out over his former society, describing the drudgery and meaninglessness that he sees:

Il fait maintenant nuit noire sur Petit-Gibet et aux alentours de Petit-Gibet. Ailleurs le soleil brille. Plus loin ailleurs il pleut. Encore plus loin ailleurs des hommes se lèvent pour aller suer dans les mines ou pour rêvasser devant des piles de rapports de comptabilité. Dans le dernier des ailleurs des hommes, brisés par les rêves scrofuleux de leur morne existence, sortent de la nuit. Mais partout ailleurs et partout ici il y a de la douleur. Il y a de la solitude. Il y a de l'angoisse. La seule question est: comment en sortir?

(49)

[The night is black right now in Petit-Gibet and all around Petit-Gibet. Elsewhere the sun is shining. Further elsewhere it's raining. Still further elsewhere men are getting out of bed to go sweat in the mines or to daydream in front of piles of accounting reports. In the last further elsewhere men, broken by the depraved dreams of their dreary existence, go out into the night. But everywhere elsewhere, and everywhere here there is sorrow. There is loneliness. There is anguish. The only question is: how to escape?]

This bleak look at Petit-Gibet and beyond reveals an oppressive and oppressed world inhabited by broken men who survive either by toil or by menial, unfulfilling tasks. When one considers Québec's cultural zeitgeist, the accuracy of the scene becomes apparent. 1968, the year in which

Mémoires d'outré-tonneau first appeared, also saw the emergence of the *Parti québécois*, Québec's nationalist political party that advocates for its secession from Canada. This party's rise to power reflected the need for the national language of the Québécois, French, "to gain expressive power by being used in various sectors of life, namely the economy, the arts, the government, management, and technology" (Coulombe 67). It is clear from this scene that Satan Belhumeur neither witnesses in other men, nor experiences for himself, this sense of expressive power. Williams tells us that during this period of time in Québec, the French-speaking minority was denied full rights to participate in public life and in the economy (20). The images and sentiments in this scene communicate this denial of rights, as the men of Petit-Gibet comprise a whole society of what appears to be second-class citizens, subjugated and void of a sense of belonging. Satan asks how they can escape this situation. The *Parti québécois* answered this question by demanding "language rights and territorial control" (ibid) for the Québécois; Satan, on the other hand, answers it with misanthropic revile.

Beyond Satan Belhumeur's personal observations, the character himself stands for Québécois alienation: "[Au] fond de moi," Satan bemoans, "je ne sais pas qui je suis" (80) [Deep down inside, I don't know who I am]. We can understand the relationship between Satan and the Québécois experience by examining Québec's nationalist position. One of the main purposes of the *Parti québécois* was to gain for the French-speaking population "some form of recognition [...] so that members [would] value themselves and regain their self-respect" (Coulombe 67). That the character Satan Belhumeur lacks both self-respect and recognition is evident in the following passage: "Est-ce ma faute à moi[...] si je suis laid? Si je suis nu? Si je pu et si je suis sale?" [...] Les gens me fuient. Je n'ai rien ni personne. Je suis seul" (Beaulieu 9) [Is it my fault if I'm ugly? If I'm naked? If I stink and if I'm dirty? People run away from me. I don't have anything or anyone. I am alone]. While obviously Satan's grotesque and extreme identity issues move far beyond the type of which

Coulombe speaks, Satan's absence or lack of identity likely still alludes to the presence of the same phenomenon throughout French-speaking Québec. In *Language Rights in French Canada*, Pierre Coulombe reasons that "it is difficult for anyone to maintain an identity if the conditions for that identity are denied by others" (67). As the Québécois, seeking to pull themselves out from under Anglophone/English-language subjugation, experienced the denial of national identity, Satan Belhumeur, who carries within himself "un monde étrange, silencieux, et impersonnel" (9) [a strange, silent, and impersonal world], experiences both societal and personal unrecognition.

To move beyond the novel's more general conveyance of cultural, and even personal alienation, and towards its allusions to Québec's linguistic identity crisis, we need look no further than Satan Belhumeur's dreams. Through an interpretation of these scenes we are able to discover that Satan's sense of powerlessness/power has a direct relationship to the sense of control he gains through language:

[J]'ai songé que j'émettais des sons dont le pouvoir sur les objets, les animaux et les hommes était immense...Des milliers d'esclaves heureux travaillaient sous mes ordres, et je me livrai sur eux à quelques expériences cruelles dans le seul but de vérifier la puissance de ma parole magique. (29)

[I dreamed that I could emit sounds that had immense power over objects, animals and men. Thousands of happy slaves worked under my command, and I performed cruel experiments on them with the sole purpose of verifying the power of my magical speech.]

In this dream, a role reversal (taken to abusive extremes) representative of the subjugated (Francophones) and the subjugator (Anglophones) takes place, whereby Satan sheds his disadvantaged status through his ultimate command of language. This dream speaks to Québec's nationalist agenda because it addresses the idea of "power and control over the public sphere" (Gauvin and Henderson 66) through language. In their article "From Octave Crémazie to Victor-

Lévy Beaulieu: Language, Literature, and Ideology," Gauvin and Henderson state that there are "cases where nationalist ideology and the national language go hand in hand because people identify themselves and their nationhood with the language they speak" (ibid). These ideas are certainly applicable to Québec, as evidenced by the conclusion reached in the late 1960s by the Royal B&B Commission that "the life of French-Canadian culture necessarily implies the life of the French language" (Coulombe 75). The character of Satan Belhumeur relates specifically to these nationalist and linguistic dialogues calling for "the abandonment of a bilingualism that was fundamentally unequal" (Larrivée 53) because he incarnates the French-speaking population in revolt against their disadvantaged social status.

In another of Satan's language-themed dreams, a sense of impersonality and powerlessness, more akin to his waking-life experience, replaces the omnipotence Satan feels in the previous dream:

La nuit dernière, j'ai rêvé ... [d'une] usine de fœtus qui reproduit à la perfection des ventres femelles où sont conçus les bébés. Des étiquettes étaient collées sur ces fœtus, mais je n'ai pu les lire car elles étaient écrites en une [. . .] langue qui m'est étrangère. (28)

[Last night, I dreamed ... [of a] fetus factory that perfectly reproduced female bellies, where babies were conceived. Labels were attached to these fetuses, but I wasn't able to read them, because they were written in a tongue that was foreign to me.]

The power dynamics represented in this second dream are fascinating for several reasons. First, the "usine de foetus" calls to mind the revenge of the cradles phenomenon. These baby-making machines, whose bellies bear writing in a foreign tongue, suggest a representation of the Anglo/Franco battle for a dominant population within Québec. Though historically it was the Roman Catholic Francophones with the highest birth rates, in this dream the presence of the labels, written in a language that he is unable to read, suggest, in an odd reversal, that these fetuses

represent an Anglophone, or “foreign” population. Furthermore, Satan's consistent debasement of women throughout this story casts them in the perpetual role of other, and this fetus factory--a veritable building full of female bellies, read: disembodied women--may stand in as a symbolic replacement for different alienating factors in his environment, i.e., the Anglophone domination of his culture and the sense of powerlessness he feels as a result of it. Of even further interest is that this factory and these bellies can simultaneously reflect, to return to the first type of allusion discussed in this analysis, a more general sense of meaninglessness and impersonality.

Achieving a sense of cultural connection and belonging through language is the logical corollary to this sense of powerlessness. However, through Satan Belhumeur, this idea manifests itself through a void of that sense of belonging. Mentioned several times throughout *Mémoires d'outre-tonneau* is Satan's belief that no one in society listens to anyone else. Satan refers to Montréal repeatedly as the "Tour de Babel" (Beaulieu 59) [Tower of Babel], asserting that all men are living in an asylum, that

[I]ls parlent tous, ils ont tous des opinions, ils écrivent tous des billets dans les journaux, des éditoriaux, des tracts, ils hurlent tous à la radio et à la télévision, ils écrivent tous des livres, et personne ne les écoute, et personne ne les écouterait plus jamais, car tout le monde est devenu tout le monde. (21)

[[T]hey all talk, they all have their opinions, they all write notes in journals, editorials, tracts, they all yell at the radio and the television, they all write books, and no one listens to them, and no one will ever listen to them, because everyone has become everyone.]

In understanding that language gives "access to, and is one of the creative forces of, shared meanings and understandings, which together contribute to define identity" (Coulombe 68), we can see that this passage conveys the reality of a collective population's detachment from society, be it the imaginary village of Petit-Gibet, or the real world metropolis of Montréal. If the importance of

language lies in the idea that it "contributes to giving a concrete shape to one's distinctness as a person, while at the same time providing a matrix for communal identification" (ibid), then Satan's observations demonstrate and symbolize a grand scale disengagement from this matrix. Not only is Satan living within a confusion of language, it is a confusion of languages that exists in a society that is disinterested in itself.

After having explored the historical context of this novel, it becomes easier to discover that this "allegory of revolt" alludes to Québec's national linguistic identity crisis at the time of the Quiet Revolution, a phenomenon that permeated all aspects of French-speaking society. Gauvin and Henderson explain that a common literary expression of the Québécois malaise leading up and during The Quiet Revolution was the attempt "to formulate formlessness and difficulty of being" (37). Beaulieu's *Mémoires* stands as a perfect example of this expression. Satan's extreme "difficulty of being" can be viewed as a symbol of the Québécois experience of cultural depreciation and linguistic subjugation. Absurdist revolt is certainly a logical option to an all-pervading sense of un-belonging.

Much has changed for Québec since *Mémoires d'outre-tonneau* and the *Parti québécois* first appeared in 1968. Forty years have past since the Quiet Revolution gave impetus to a national sovereignty movement and hope for Québec to "se libérer du joug des repressions" (Beaulieu, "Papineau" 1) [liberate itself from the yoke of repressions]. Some would argue that Québec has entirely succeeded in safeguarding the French language and the Québécois culture. Others, like Beaulieu, believe Québec can never experience true liberty until it becomes an independent nation. Popular support for the independentist movement has waxed and waned, leading up to the current political situation, with Beaulieu declaring "nous n'avons jamais été aussi loin de l'indépendance que nous le sommes actuellement" (ibid) [we have never been as far from independence as we are right now].

The most remarkable event following The Quiet Revolution was the passing of Bill 101 on August

26, 1977, a year after the *Parti québécois* won its first victory. Also known as 'The Charter of the French Language, this bill reflected the National Assembly's resolve "to make French the language of Government and Law, as well as the normal and everyday language of work, instruction, communication, commerce and business" (Chevrier 133). On this date, French was established as the sole language of Québec. Camille Laurin, *Parti québécois* Minister of State for Cultural Development, who regarded language policy as integral to the process of undoing "the Francophone experience of conquest and domination, frustration and insecurity" (qtd in Levine 113), lauded Bill 101 as an "act that fundamentally reverses the course of [Québec's] history of the last two centuries... Québec is hereafter and forever French" (ibid 118-119). Over the next ten years, Montréal witnessed the mass exodus of unilingual English-speakers from the province. This exodus strengthened the image of Montréal as "an island in a sea of English-speaking people" (Fabbi 5). Three years later, the *Parti québécois* introduced the 1980 Québec Referendum, the first referendum to put the issue of sovereignty on the ballot. It was defeated by a nineteen percent margin.

In the 1980s, there were two chances for Canada to establish a doctrine of duality for itself. Both failed. The first occurred in 1982, after the United Kingdom transferred all remaining legal powers over to Canada. Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau called for various amendments to Canada's constitution, and all provinces approved and ratified the new constitution except Québec, which claimed that it limited Québécois language rights. Trudeau, "rather than working with the issue until it was resolved, went ahead and amended the constitution without Québec's signature" (Fabbi 7), a move that upset the Québécois because, "once again, they felt that the English Canadians would rather bully them than include them as partners" (ibid). The second opportunity for duality, The Meech Lake Accord of 1987, aimed to correct the mistakes made five years earlier. The accord seemed to have satisfied all concerned parties, "until last minute objections from English Canada, in particular against the clause asserting the distinct status of Quebec" (Warren 84), which many English-speakers believed granted Québec special status. After the Meech Lake Accord fell through, many Québécois nationalists believed they were seeing "the dream of duality finally

vanish from the collective imagination of the Québécois" (Coulombe 138). To this day Québec finds itself "in effect outside the Canadian constitutional order" (Warren 84). Nevertheless, The Meech Lake Accord incident greatly affected the Québécois' support for independence. Its rejection brought "unprecedented levels of nationalist feelings in Québec" (Warren 84), and when the new sovereignty referendum appeared on the ballot in 1995, it was rejected by a mere majority of one percent.

The year 2003 saw the *Parti libéral* beat the *Parti québécois* in provincial elections, ending the pro-independence party's nine-year rule. Four years later in 2007, the Action Democratic Party, advocating for autonomy for Québec, but within Canada, gained such support in provincial elections as to knock the *Parti québécois* into third party status. In February 2008, the current *Parti québécois* leader, sharply diverging from the party's tradition of strict separatism, advocated for the teaching of English in Québec elementary school classroom. In protest of this development, VLB chucked his most recent novel, *La Grande tribu*, into the fire.

In the forty years that Beaulieu has been writing, he has won no fewer than thirteen prestigious literary awards, including the Prix Québec-Paris, the Grand Prix littéraire de la Ville de Montréal, and Canada's Governor General Award, for which he was a finalist on two other occasions. He is also the founder of his own publishing house, VLB editions. VLB's work flourished in the years following The Quiet Revolution with their express purpose of "expos[ing] and address[ing] the situation of the hard-done-by francophone Quebecker" (Richler, "Country" 363). In 1974, Robert Guy Scully of *Le Devoir* said of the author, "VLB est notre Balzac, non seulement il dit aux autres comment faire leurs livres, il sait faire les siens" (qtd. in Melançon 13) [VLB is our Balzac, not only does he tell other how to make their books, he knows how to make his own]. In 1983, scholar Benoît Melançon declared Beaulieu "d'abord un personnage (qu'on ne *peut* pas faire disparaître) et une institution (qu'on ne *veut* pas faire disparaître)" (italics his 7) [first of all a character (that one *can't* make disappear) and an institution (that one doesn't *want* to make disappear)]. While it

is true that his staunch separatism and his penchant for dramatics and harsh language have won him more than a few enemies,¹² his talent for expressing the hopes and concerns of the Québécois are what made him one of Québec's most-widely read authors.

VLB's most recent novel, *La Grande tribu, c'est la faute à Papineau (grotesquerie)*, has been the focus of great controversy in Québec since its release five months ago not so much for its content as for the fact that the author burned it before it even hit the bookstores. What Beaulieu communicates through this story, however, is controversial in its own right. By playing fiction and biography off each other in a calculated dance, Beaulieu traces Québec's struggle to its endpoint, that is to say, to the endpoint that he and 1,485,851¹³ other Québécois nationalists visualized for Québec following the Quiet Revolution. While employing themes of loss, illness and disability, and through the exploration and deconstruction of institutionally-established definitions of patriotism and rebellion, Beaulieu picks up where Papineau left off, and this time the rebellion comes out in his favor.

In speaking of this novel, Victor-Lévy Beaulieu has recently said: "[j]'ai appelé ça une grotesquerie, parce que ce n'est pas vraiment un roman. C'est plutôt une sorte de fable" (qtd. in Desmeules, 2) [I called it a grotesquerie, because it's not really a novel. It's rather a sort of fable]. Christian Desmeules of *Le Devoir* has called it a "[g]ros livre bicéphale" [a fat two-headed book]; at

¹² Beaulieu has created quite a track record for himself in the last two years. In addition to his remarks about Pauline Marois, he called Québécois separatist playwright, Michel Tremblay, a "turncoat" and an "asshole" after Tremblay said he no longer believed in a sovereigntist movement based on economic arguments rather than cultural identity (MacPherson, 1). He has threatened to knock out the teeth of Canadian author Noah Richler, after Richler wrote unfavorably of VLB's politics in his latest novel, *This is My Country, What's Yours?* Most controversially, VLB wrote an article in *L'Aut' Journal* calling Canadian governor-general Michaëlle Jean a "negro-queen" ("Bloc blast" 1). VLB defended his statement, saying that he did not intend to be racist, but was using this term "based on the so-called theory of the roi-nègre, which he said refers to leaders of African colonies who deliver the colonizer's message to the population" (ibid).

¹³ This number is taken from the amount of viable "oui" ballots cast in the 1980 Sovereignty Referendum vote. See "Référendum du 20 mai 1980."

876 pages, divided into two continuously alternating two parts, Desmeules's description is apt. This is a monster of a book. Beaulieu calls it his vision of Québec. The first part, *Les Libérateurs*, offers vibrant biographies of popular liberators of the nineteenth century: Simon Bolivar, Abraham Lincoln, Jules Michelet, Daniel O'Connell, Walt Whitman, Charles Chiniquy and, of course, Québec's own Louis-Joseph Papineau. The second part, *Les Lésionnaires*, is an excessive, hallucinogenic, at times horrifying fictional story told in the first person of Habaquq Cauchon, a double amputee with prosthetic legs and a purported hole in his brain, who lives in a mental asylum and who has made it his task to delve deep into his origins. Cauchon, a Québécois, has discovered that he is the proud descendant of half-men / half-pigs, from the nation of the *Peuple des Petits Cochons Noirs* [People of the Little Black Pigs]. Cauchon befriends a resident of the asylum, *l'original épormyable*,¹⁴ and together they meet up with the *Parti des lésions*¹⁵ for a grass-roots assault on Canada's National Assembly, demanding a unilateral declaration of independence for Québec.

In a February 2008 interview with *Le Devoir*'s Christian Desmeules, Beaulieu said that Papineau represents at a certain level, "le père fondateur du Québec -- mais qui ne l'a pas été" (Desmeules 2) [the founding father of Québec, but who wasn't]. It is this "wasn't" that forms one of the recurring themes of *La Grande tribu* -- of being denied liberty, of having lost, of still losing. This becomes evident in the second, "grotesquerie" part of the book, which will be the main focus this analysis, through the ridiculous chants that pour uncontrollably from Cauchon's mouth all

¹⁴ *La charge de l'original épormyable*, is the title of a play written by Québécois author Claude Gauvreau. Gauvreau was known for deconstructing and reconstructing vocabulary, creating the Exploean Language. His aim was to dismantle the stifling, religious ideologies of 1950s Québec. Gauvreau was institutionalized in Montréal over ten times in eight years after his lover's suicide in 1952. Beaulieu's character in *La Grande tribu* is a tribute to Gauvreau, whom Beaulieu also considered a liberator. At the time of this paper, I was unable to discover the meaning of the Exploean word "épormyable".

¹⁵ This word *lésion* (in English "lesion") is but one of many plays-on-words that Beaulieu employs throughout his novel. It plays on the word "legion," and through it Beaulieu expresses the sentiments of an army of rebels, bound by their shared experiences of being repressed and wounded by the past, and by their thirst for liberty through sovereignty.

throughout *La Grande tribu*:

Si les Kebekois si mous
 Ont toujours peur des loups-garous,
 Si ne sentant plus leur importance,
 Il cauchemardent l'independance,
 C'est la faute à Papineau,
 C'est la faute, faute, faute,
 C'est la faute à Papineau! (545)
 [If the Québécois still shudder
 At the thought of boogey monsters
 If not sensing their importance
 They have nightmares about independence
 It's the fault of Papineau,
 It's the fault, fault, fault
 It's the fault of Papineau!]

Though the above is one of the more sensical chants to be found in the story, one cannot deny that even the weirdest and most non-sequitor of them bears witness to the message behind Beaulieu's title: without necessarily wishing to blame the man...*C'est la faute à Papineau!* That is to say, if the Rebellion of 1837 had gone the other way, perhaps Québec would be a sovereign nation right now.

But Québec is not. And Papineau did lose. No one knows this better than Cauchon; he's receiving shock therapy so that he'll stop thinking about it. In the asylum, which Cauchon's girlfriend *la petite actrice russe* [the little Russian actress] compares to the Canadian government, "une gigantesque enterprise de repression dont le seul but est de garder le pouvoir qu'on a" (724) [a gigantic enterprise of repression whose soul purpose is to keep its power], Doctor Avincenne, a

mad, experimenting tyrant who is later elected Canada's Minister of Health, has made Cauchon his pet project. After the death of his mother, a proud descendant of the *Peuple des Petits Cochons Noirs*, Cauchon became orphaned, and so fell under the care of Doctor Avincenne. When Cauchon developed a skin-eating disease that necessitated the amputation of his legs, Doctor Avincenne performed the operation. Later, when Cauchon developed a brain tumor, the doctor operated on that, too. This operation left a hole in Cauchon's head that, according to the Doctor, never healed. Cauchon's "trou dans le crâne" (78) [hole in the head] is the cause of his insanity. It makes him act and speak in patriotic and rebellious ways. It is the source of his nationalist consciousness.

The *mise-en-scène* of *La Grande tribu* paints of grim picture of a disabled nation in need of healing. In Cauchon's physical and mental disabilities, inflicted upon him by a two-faced, tyrannical institution that is supposed to care for its residents, the allusion to Beaulieu's vision of Québec, as a Francophone nation under the yoke of a bullying, federalist Anglophone government, is clear. But much more lies beyond this blatant allusion. Cauchon has been struggling within Dr. Avincenne's institution since the day he was pulled, mangled by the doctor's forceps, from his mother's birth canal; and he has been in the doctor's grips since his mother's death when he was a young boy. In Cauchon's traumatic, forced entrance into an unwelcoming world, we can see a culture invaded by a colonial power. In Cauchon's mother's death, we witness a people without a home.

Under Doctor Avincenne's "care", Cauchon has been subjected to electroshock, lobotomy, the straight-jacket, insulin therapy, being boiled overnight in a vat, and being hanged naked from a butcher's hook, overnight, in a cold room. All this for the simple reason that Cauchon is a "[m]auvaise graine d'insubordination! Mauvais semence et démence séparatiste!" (100) [a bad seed of insubordination! Bad seed and separatist dementia]. Doctor Avincenne will not let up until he has made of Cauchon a "vrai patriote, [...] quelqu'un qui respecte le gouvernement parce que le gouvernement c'est l'autorité et que l'autorité est là pour qu'on l'écoute, l'aime et l'aide" (502) [a true patriot, someone who respects the government because the

government is the authority and the authority is there to be listened to, loved, and helped]. But for all the suffering that the doctor inflicts upon him, at his core Cauchon remains untouchable. "Aucune souffrance ne m'est insupportable!" Cauchon declares [There isn't any suffering that I can't bear!], because, he cries, "mon genie est souverain!" (507) [my spirit is sovereign]. Through the many interactions between Doctor Avincenne and Cauchon, Beaulieu carries the theme of disability, and mental illness in particular, far beyond any representation of the scars and wounds of a culture having suffered past injustices; Beaulieu establishes Cauchon's mental illness as an external rather than an internal entity; his disease does not really exist, it is a product manufactured by the institution that purports to cure it: "La schizophrénie, nous avons toujours vécu dedans" (821) [Schizophrenia, we have always lived inside it], Cauchon tells the doctor; in other words, this mental illness is not his disease, it is the disease of the institution. Beaulieu is not subtle in his allusion. As he has painted it, Cauchon's schizophrenia is Québec's: "...à moi seule, je constitue toute la nation, son idée raciale et son idée civile, son idée de rébellion et son idée d'indépendance" (68) [I alone, I constitute the entire nation, its racial idea and its civil idea, its idea of rebellion and its idea of independence]; as we follow the story, we come to understand that, according to Beaulieu, just as Cauchon's only hope for healing is to gain freedom from the asylum, the Québécois's only hope for cultural survival is to win autonomy for Québec.

As his story progresses, Cauchon, after a series of memory-cleansing electroshock therapies, does gain freedom from the asylum, though only after also undergoing brain surgery during which a remote control is planted inside the hole in his head for the purpose of administering electric shocks whenever Cauchon has thoughts of rebellion, or sentiments of patriotism or alliance towards his true ancestry. Although Cauchon is monitored day and night, and repeatedly electrocuted for his transgressions, even the remote-controlled implant in his brain is unsuccessful in altering his consciousness or his alliances. In an obvious nod to Québec's provincial motto "je me souviens" [I will remember], recalling Papineau's Rebellion of 1837, and to the strength and perseverance of a culture whose existence Beaulieu deems as still

threatened, Beaulieu reveals Cauchon as a man who refuses to deny his past, and who, even when faced with the threat of physical violence, will not be controlled or defined by repressive institutional paradigms.

Traditionally-established definitions of rebellion and patriotism are two such ideological concepts which come under the trenchant scrutiny of Beaulieu in this novel. In a discussion preceding the *Parti des lésions* violent take-over of Canada's National Assembly, *l'original épormyable* tells Cauchon : "[q]uand on est rebelle et patriote, le terrorisme n'existe pas. On est toujours le terroriste de quelqu'un" (794) [when one is a rebel and a patriot, terrorism doesn't exist, one is always the terrorist of someone]. Beaulieu cleverly and strongly supports this fictional character's point of view through the development of the biographical chapters in this work, and discussed this purposeful development in a recent interview with *Le Devoir's* Christian Desmeules: "Moi, j'admets le terrorisme exactement pour les memes raisons que Michel Foucault, à savoir pour des raisons nationalistes. Pensons aux Irlandais, par exemple, qui ont eu ce courage-là. Ceux qui réussissent, pour revenir à mon livre, on ne les appelle pas des terroristes, mais des libérateurs" (3) [Me, I accept terrorism for exactly the same reasons as Michel Foucault does, namely for nationalistic reasons. Think of the Irish, for example, who had such courage. Those who succeed, to return to my book, they aren't called terrorists, but liberators]. Québec's Papineau, to choose the most logical of *La Grande tribu's* "*Liberateurs*," is a perfect example of Beaulieu's (and Foucault's) argument. To the English-Canadians, he was a troublesome rebel with a price on his head, but to the French-Canadians, he was "le chef politique québécois" (2) [Québec's political leader].

In light of the subversive convictions Beaulieu expresses throughout his work, both through fiction and biography, one cannot help but wonder if the writer regards militant action as an appropriate and/or viable choice for contemporary Québec in winning its long-sought sovereignty. In a February 2008 essay addressing his novel and his political discontent, Beaulieu stated:

Moi qui suis pacifiste, je voudrais que le Québec devienne un pays et que cela lui arrive sans violence. Mais maintenant que nous n'avons plus de parti indépendantiste, que faire? Nous

laisser assimiler en contribuant nous-mêmes à cette assimilation? ("Papineau" 1)

[I, who am a pacifist, I would like for Québec to become a country and for this to come to pass without violence. But now that we no longer have an independentist party, what are we supposed to do? Contribute to our own assimilation?]

One of the great powers of meaning's deconstruction lies in its ability to unveil institutional and governmental agendas such as, for example, those learned of by Americans through an examination of the civil rights violations conducted under the United States Patriot Act. Certainly a patriot to some is a rebel (or terrorist) to others, but as some Americans may have learned, a meaning can only be subverted so far before it turns into doublespeak. In regarding Beaulieu's essay, I must ask myself how it is possible for a pacifist to advocate for violence. In *La Grande tribu*, Québec wins sovereignty by military action. In his essay, he alludes to the necessity of it. If, as Beaulieu states, he does not separate his work for the destiny of Québec, is this what he believes the Nationalist movement must come to?

Ultimately, in the case of Québec, the choice comes down to the voice of the people. Right now, that voice, a non-violent voice, a voice that expresses itself through the ballot rather than the barrel of a gun, has chosen to be a part of Canada, as English-language dominated as it is. But even in light of this situation, it is still not difficult to understand why a writer of such radical, separatist convictions as Beaulieu's might burn his masterpiece in his own woodstove. The disparity he sees between his vision of Québec as it should be (a vision he has been writing since 1973) and Québec as it is, is significant. Beaulieu views Marois's suggestion to add more English classes to Québec's school curriculum as a sign that "le Parti québécois [...] a renoncé à faire de l'indépendance l'idée fondamentale de son action" ("Pourquoi" 1) [the Party Québécois has abandoned independence as the fundamental idea of their action]. It has been several years since Beaulieu lived in Montréal. The francophone city which gave rise to Quiet Revolution Beaulieu now regards as a "kind of den of political iniquity, and lost to the nationalist cause" (Richler, "Teeth" 61). What

Beaulieu may not realize is that there might no longer be a question of whether or not this loss is a bad thing, or a good thing; more accurately, the loss just is. Canadian author Noah Richler, in his recent book, "This is My Country, What's Yours?" has said of contemporary Québec,

Today, Quebec is a more sophisticated society, and VLB's voice is but one of many disputing it. [. . .] But sure, say many, Quebec society is different --but so, in principle, is everybody's else's. A kind of nullification has taken place as a new generation of Canadians, including [Quebecois], has become politically engaged with the world under grossly changed conditions of globalization and a massively various immigration affecting *all* of the country. (366)

At this, VLB, a notoriously confrontational character, threatened to knock Richler's teeth out. On a more reserved note, however, Beaulieu met this argument by stating that, because there is no longer a *Parti québécois*, he feels like an orphan.

Perhaps there might be something important to be discovered in Beaulieu's sentiment beyond its personal validity. Author Colin William discusses the impact of English dominance on minority languages in his article "Language Policy and Planning Issues in Multicultural Societies," not only in French-Canadian communities, but the world-over. His views are very much in-line with VLB's lingering concerns over the dilution of the French language in Québec:

Language, and the ideology it conveys, is [...] part of the legitimization of positions within the global division of labour. Attempts to separate English from its British and North American value system are misguided, for English should not be interpreted as if it were primarily a *tabula rasa*. Any claim that English is now a neutral, pragmatic tool for global development is disingenuous, because it involves a 'disconnection between what English is ("culture") from its structural basis (from what it *has* and *does*)'. It disconnects the *means* from the *ends* or *purpose*, from what English is being used for. This type of reasoning 'is part of the rationalization process whereby the unequal power relations between English and other languages are explained and

legitimated. It fits into the familiar linguistic pattern of the dominant language creating an external image of itself, other languages being devalued and the relationship between the two rationalized in favor of the dominant language. This applies to each type of argument, whether persuasion, bargaining, or threats are used, all of which serve to reproduce English linguistic hegemony. (41)

In *La Grande tribu*, during a scene in the asylum in which Doctor Avincenne administers "therapy" to Habbaq Cauchon, Cauchon pleases the Doctor by telling him what he wishes to hear concerning Cauchon's newfound loyalty to Canada: "[un] seul pays" he says [one single country], "une seule nation et tous les rebelles éliminés ou envoyés en Irak et en Afghanistan pour se battre. La liberté! Je me meurs de combattre pour la liberté maintenant que je suis guéri!" (500) [one single nation and all the rebels eliminated or sent to Iraq and to Afghanistan to fight. Liberty! I will kill myself in combat for freedom now that I am cured!]. This excerpt serves as a fine example of what Beaulieu views as the inevitable repercussions of indifference to cultural and linguistic assimilation. For Beaulieu, the Québécois surrender to the English language is not just a surrender to bilingualism, it is a surrender to globalization, uniformity and post-colonial capitalist imperialism.

Despite feeling like an orphan in his own country, Beaulieu is not giving up on the dream of independence. After weeks of consideration, VLB announced this April that instead of burning the rest of his books in protest, he will be offering them up, for free, to the *Parti indépendantiste*, so that they may use them to fund their cause. This will not be a loss for him; he will be representing the party in the next election.

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