Acadian Exile in the Georgia: Pelagie and Southern Literature

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Antonine Maillet, winner of both the Canadian Governor General’s Award for fiction and France’s Prix Goncourt, tells the tale in her novel Pelagie (in French, Pelagie-la-Charrette) of a courageous Acadian woman, Pelagie, and her return to Acadia on an ox cart, fifteen years after Le Grand Derangement exiled her in Georgia. Bernard Aresu (1986) and Marjorie Fitzpatrick (1985), among others, have praised Pelagie for its strong characters, its linguistic sophistication, its mythic themes, and its use of folklore. What I find striking are several features of the novel that place the story in a Southern context. Southern fiction is peopled by rebellious characters who are bound to place and who cling to a lost, glorious past—a claim made quickly evident, I hope, by reference to such works as The Sound and the Fury, Gone With the Wind, Cold Mountain. Antonine Maillet isn’t William Faulkner or Margaret Mitchell, but she does construct a wok in Pelagie that shares some features with Southern literature.

John William Corrington and Miller Williams (1966) claim identification with place and past as central to Southern character. They talk about “lost causes” and “landscapes haunted by ghosts” (p. x). However, when we first meet Pelagie, she is already in motion, having sold everything, “household linen and pewter mugs . . . even the plank hut that had eased their exile” to help pay for a cart and three teams of oxen that will take her from exile in Hope, Georgia where she has been living for fifteen years “under a heavy southern sun and the boot of a brutal cotton planter” (Maillet, 1982, p. 6, 7). If there is any “good omen” from having landed in this town, Pelagie believes that it is in the town’s name, a name that portends her return to the country of Hope—“paradise lost”—Acadie (p. 8). Hope, Georgia, therefore, serves only to rekindle a desire to return to a different landscape, the fields and marshes of Acadia, not a desire to remain in the marshes surrounding Isle of Hope, the present day Savannah suburb and the location of Wormsloe Plantation, an actual historical 18th-century cotton and silk worm plantation that resembles...
Pelagie’s place of exile. For Pelagie the landscape of Hope, Georgia is a place filled with longing, an ironic reminder of her lost land and life.

Pelagie’s desire to return home is at odds with the desire of others to remain in the South. Acadia’s Southern exiles, “dumped off at random in creeks and bays” along the east coast after the expulsion from Grand Pre in 1755, have been, “little by little resettling their roots in foreign soil,” during Pelagie’s residence in Georgia (Maillet, 1982, p. 7). She must return to Grand Pre, to the graves of dead family members, in order to reclaim her past before it is gone. She must go home before she becomes like some of her comrades, the ones she calls “Quitters” (p. 7), the ones who have abandoned themselves in exile. In Georgia and the Carolinas, she rallies these Acadians, “bringing them back against the current. For the current ran south in those days” (Maillet, 1982, p. 77).

One group of exiles running south proves resistant to Pelagie’s pleas—these are the exiles intent on settling in Louisiana. These exiles (the Moutons, the Martins, the Thibodeux—families whose names are still commonly heard in Lafouche Parish) are the most difficult to persuade to return, for these families want to start anew in the parishes and bayous where perhaps they can live “a plantation life . . . on vast, rich, virgin lands” (Maillet, 1982, p. 101). Pelagie views the Louisiana Acadians with an ambivalent eye: she understands their dream to live in a French-speaking world, even if it is in a Southern landscape, but she sees the Louisiana diaspora as an “absurd and miserable little bit of . . . family” (Maillet, 1982, p. 103). However sincere, these folks are misguided and, certainly, misdirected.

In addition to challenging south Louisiana as an appropriate place for Acadian settlement, Maillet, through the character of Pelagie, creates a woman who runs counter to female characters frequently found in American fiction. Often portrayed as chiefly hapless figures—think of Chalotte Temple, for example, in Susannah Rowson’s 18th century romance—these women were, for the most part, as Annette Kolodny observes, driven “meekly westward” to “a desolate wilderness” (1985, p. 109). Victim/heroes, such women were given to swooning and fainting at the approach of the slightest crisis and lived their lives under the sway of men: first their fathers and then their husbands (often husbands old enough to be their fathers).

In Pelagie, moreover, Maillet gives us a foil to that great 19th century Acadian heroine, the much beloved, long suffering figure of Longfellow’s Evangeline and to Evangeline’s heir, Felix Voorhies’s Emmeline Labice. Voorhies, in his 1907 work, Acadian Reminiscences, subtitled, misleadingly as Carl Brasseaux has demonstrated, The True Story of the Acadians, renames Longfellow’s Evangeline as Emmeline, and her Gabriel becomes Louis Arcenault. Evangeline/Emmeline finds her way to south Louisiana only to discover that her Gabriel/Louis has remarried and resettled in St. Martinville, Louisiana, the center of Voorhies’s Acadian world. Gabriel/Louis’s
life and death in Lousiana after the 1755 expulsion endorses Voorhies's (and before him, Longfellow's) view of Acadian settlement in the South. The farmers of Grand Pre become the colorful characters in Bayou Teche.

Against these women, Maillet casts Pelagie, a beautiful, intelligent, courageous hero, quite capable of leading her charges out of the South. In fact, Pelagie is quite the equal of another Acadian hero also dedicated to collecting exiles and returning them to their homeland. After she crosses the Savannah River and travels through Charleston, South Carolina, Pelagie spies a ship, the Grand Goule, captained by Joseph Broussard-Beausoleil, a "Robin Hood of the Seas" (Maillet, 1982, p. 71). Broussard-Beausoleil is fashioned after the historical Beausoleil Broussard who transported many Acadians from detention camps in Halifax after an unhappy stay in Saint-Dominque (LeBlanc, 2003, p. 48).

Beausoleil is a courageous, impressive figure for Pelagie and her charges, but Pelagie is his match as a leader, and she is his romantic match as well. Beausoleil is handsome. Pelagie, a widow and the mother of five, is still beautiful. She has "all her hair and all her teeth," her "breasts were firm, and the skin of her arms was barely wrinkled inside the elbow" (Maillet, 1982, p. 91). But physical appeal is just the surface attraction between the captain and the ox driver. Looking deep into Pelagie’s "fine eyes" Beausoleil sees a character undaunted and undeterred from her mission. "What a woman," he reflects, "this Pelagie! Capable single-handed of bringing her people home. . . . Who crossed his path but this stiff-necked, proud-bowed woman" (Maillet, 1982, p. 77).

Leading her ox cart caravan, Pelagie is an iconoclastic figure headed for home, a place vital to her character but not a place located in the South. If the Southern literary influence is somewhat evident through characterization and setting in the novel, the importance of the past, so prominent a feature in Southern writing, is made very clear in the narration of Pelagie.

The speaker who first greets us in the "Prologue" is our contemporary; a child of the carts, this narrator claims lineage from Louis a Belonie, a 19th century character who tells the tale of the caravan as he has inherited it from Old Belonie, the nearly 100-year-old member of Pelagie's original caravan. The Belonies are important because they are storytellers and chroniclers. Without them, as the contemporary narrator tells us, "History would have rolled over and died at the end of every century" (Maillet, 1982, p. 3).

But the Belonie storytellers perpetuate the notion that the very cart that leads the Acadians home, the lead cart—Pelagie's cart—belongs to them and not to Pelagie. The basis for this claim comes from an incident that occurs as the caravan passes through Salem, Massachusetts. Since setting out from Georgia, Old Belonie has had visions of a shadow cart, a Death Cart, dogging the steps of the exiles. Finally, in Salem, this Death Cart appears ready to claim the lives of those in Pelagie's cart, the lead cart,
as it sinks in Salem’s marshes. The machinations, trickery, magic, and prayers that Old Belonie calls into play in order to save Pelagie’s cart are funny, engagingly recounted, and miraculously effective. Old Belonie’s assistance gives rise to the story, told and retold by successive Belonies, that the cart that is saved is Belonie’s cart rather than Pelagie’s.

The cart’s rescue, Pelagie realizes, is “the grandest moment. . . . From now on she could lift her head and look the north in the face” (Maillet, 1982, p. 209). In something of an anticlimax, the caravan crawls through northern New England, arriving finally at the Tantramar Marshes not far from Grand Pre, but far enough for Pelagie; she dies and is buried with her cart. She dies realizing that “the family who had left Georgia by cart had reached Acadia, they had become a people” (Maillet, 1982, p. 243). She calls for Acadians to keep the memory of Acadia “green in your hearts and blood” (Maillet, 1982, p. 242).

This call to remember Acadia is heeded by Pelagie’s great granddaughter, Pelagie the Grouch, who creeps out of the Acadian woods about 100 years after Pelagie’s death to tell her side of the story, which, to no one’s surprise, is different from the view of her contemporary, Louis a Belonie. The differing stories demonstrate that a recollection of the past must include all accounts. There is no reason, finally, to decide who owns the cart; it belongs to all Acadians. There is truth in each version of the story. Both Belonie’s and Pelagie the Grouch’s recollections are correct.

The Grouch tells her tale about the same time that the First Acadian Convention takes place in Memramcook, N.B. (1881). By juxtaposing a fictional account with an official Acadian account of the expulsion, Maillet puts forth an inclusive view of history, a history that contains fact and fiction, formal and informal report, male and female points of view.

In addition to the emphasis on inclusion, the narration also emphasizes the importance of an Acadian awareness of the past. The story of the 1755 expulsion must wait 100 years before it starts to take shape officially through the Acadian Convention and unofficially through the Grouch’s story. These two versions, seasoned with Belonie commentary, must wait yet another 100 years before reclaimed and retold by the Maillet. Such “consciousness of history and self,” characteristic of Southern literature, as Lewis Simpson tells us, is also evident in the narration of Pelagie (Simpson, 1979, p. 154).

At the end of the novel, Maillet notes that she finished the book in Buctouche, New Brunswick, June 23, 1979, the year of the 375th anniversary of Acadie. (The year 2004, of course, marked the 400th anniversary of the French settlement at Port Royal.) Maillet’s final notation underscores her self-consciousness as a storyteller constructing a version of the past that claims a central place for Acadians. In this revealing end note, Maillet underscores the novel’s importance as a work illustrating an Acadian
“crossing of the ways,” the term Allen Tate uses to describe the moment in twentieth century Southern literature when Southern writers came to an awareness of themselves and the South as part of the great sweep of modern history and not merely a marginalized region (Tate, 1968). Revisiting the story of the Acadians for the Globe and Mail series on great events in Canada’s history, Maillet tells her readers, “Don’t look for this story in a book. . . . It is waiting for storytellers who do not recount history just as it happened, like historians, but in their own way, the only true way you really want to hear” (Maillet, 2001). This consciousness of the past as a story that needs to be claimed by those who lived it and made meaningful by those who have inherited it moves both the Southern writer and Antonine Maillet.

References


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