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Thomas M. Carr Jr.

University of Nebraska - Lincoln, tcarr1@unl.edu

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Consolation and the Work of Mourning in *Angéline de Montbrun*

by Thomas M. Carr, Jr.

THE DYNAMICS of this foundational text¹ of Canadian literature come from its heroine's drive to resolve her overwhelming sense of loss. Angéline loses her father, her beauty, and the love of her fiancé Maurice within the space of three pages against a backdrop formed by memory of the loss suffered at the Conquest. Indeed, reading the novel under the sign of resignation is a commonplace. Critics as diverse as the early Catholic reviewers, more recent biographically-oriented researchers, and Freudian and feminist commentators have underscored Angéline's attempts to resign herself to this succession of losses.² To a lesser extent they have also noted the link the novel makes between consolation and resignation.³ However, most such comments do not do justice to the centrality of mourning and consolation in *Angéline*.⁴

Freud's 1917 paper, "Mourning and Melancholia," in which he elaborated the notion of grief work, inaugurated the twentieth-century discourse on bereavement. His notion that adjusting to a loss requires a struggle during which the bereaved comes to grips with memories of the lost object has remained a point of reference, even for theorists of grieving who reject psychoanalytic premises.⁵ However, Laure Conan's own approach is based in the consolatory tradition that dates from Antiquity and that was christianized by the early Church. While grief work emphasizes the disengagement of psychic investment from the lost object so that it can be reinvested in a new one, consolation is often associated with an alleviation of the pain of loss through some compensation. Such compensation can include a replacement for the loss, emotional responses that alleviate the pain of loss, or ideas and attitudes that allow the griever to reframe intellectually the loss. Given Conan's religious bent, it is not surprising that her novel privileges spiritual consolations over human ones; indeed, one of her first preserved texts, written during her school days with the Ursulines of Québec, exalts the consoling power of Catholicism: "Tout dans notre religion a une signification profonde et consolante" (Dumont 22). Thus heaven is a replacement or reward for the travails of this life. Spiritual joys compensate for the doubts and anguish of despair that often accompany

loss. Finally, spiritual consolation can involve an intellectual reinterpretation of the loss as when belief in providence allows one to see it more positively as part of God's larger beneficent design. Angéline's trajectory from human to spiritual consolations must be interpreted in terms of the consolatory tradition that permeated Conan's religiosity; at the same time, the insights into mourning of twentieth-century psychology help explain why the consolation Angéline achieves is so problematic.

The novel's action can be read as Angéline's search for consolation, in which she follows a consolatory cure prescribed by her father, Charles de Montbrun. In its initial form this cure is proposed in the crucial event of the novel's first section, Maurice's engagement to Angéline which is cast in terms of consolation. When Charles proposes his terms for his daughter's marriage, he invokes consolation to explain the arrangement under which, in marrying Angéline, Maurice will also "marry" him (38). Angéline's boundless attachment for her father would make Charles the happiest of men, he declares, were he not saddened by the thought of the suffering that his death will cause her (39). If he accepts Maurice as his son-in-law, it is so that Maurice's love can console his daughter after his death. "[P]renez ma place dans son cœur, et Dieu veuille que ma mort ne lui soit pas l'inconsolable douleur" (39). Consolation thus defines the relation between Charles and Maurice. An implicit contract is drawn up between the two men in which Charles agrees to share Angéline with Maurice, but only with the understanding that Maurice's true role is to console Angéline after Charles's death.

After Charles's funeral in part two of the novel, Angéline is prey to inconsolable sorrow, "ce sentiment intense qui se refuse à la consolation" (86). The structure of the novel's third and most successful part—which consists of recollections of past episodes with Maurice and her father alternating with the narration of events occurring during the six-month period over which she records her journal, interspersed with seven letters she writes or receives—parallels the account that Freud gives of grief work in "Mourning and Melancholia." Thus, this third part of the novel, called by one Freudian commentator an "embryon d'une autopsychanalyse" (Hayward 40), is also a literary representation of the work of mourning.

After some loss, Freud maintains, "Reality-testing has shown that the loved object no longer exists, and it proceeds to demand that all libido shall be withdrawn from its attachments to that object" (244). However, this withdrawal can only take place if the lost object is first resuscitated by the memory. "Each single one of the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object is brought up and hypercatheted, and detachment of the libido is accomplished in respect of it" (245).

This accounts for the fact that the core of the novel's third part consists of clusters of recollections. Many of the past events forming the basis of these memories had only been sketched out in the first two sections of the novel; they are now vividly relived, charging them with psychic ener-

gy or hypercathecting them in Freud's terminology. Moreover, the reader must now reconstruct their chronology because the past events are presented in terms of how they contribute to Angéline's attempt to work through her losses, not in the order in which they occurred. The focus alternates between past and present, between memory and some current incident that triggers the recollection.

Effective grief work requires not only reliving past events in the memory, but also trying to reframe how they are understood. It combines intensely experiencing the emotions of the past with intellectual insight that promotes acceptance of the loss. Angéline's effort to make sense of her loss accounts for the aphoristic quality of many of the journal entries. Whether lengthy quotations copied from other books, verses from poems, or lapidary maxims of her own confection, they all attest to her effort to find a perspective that will promote consoling acquiescence to the will of God. Their fragmentary nature is testimony to her difficulty in creating a unified point of view.

Her four letters to Mina (late May, late June, late August, mid-September) allow her to sum up periodically the evolution of the doubts and interrogations recorded in her diary entries. In fact, writing this diary proves to be one of the most effective therapies of consolation for Angéline. Isolated at Valriant, she uses her diary as a substitute for speaking about her losses, a fact made explicit in the first edition where Conan states, "C'est là qu'elle vécut seule avec ses regrets dont elle ne parlait jamais" (December 1881, 722). The novel gives no indication regarding who collected the diary entries and inserted the letters, but it would not have been out of character for Angéline to have planned for Maurice, to whom she left Valriant (111), to come upon them while settling her estate.

Angéline's apparent rejection of Maurice in the novel's last pages suggests that this grief work that structures the novel's third part has been successful. Angéline is reconciled to her loss by sacrificing transitory human consolations for the permanence of divine ones. However, the elusiveness of this victory of the spiritual over the merely human will become apparent in light of contemporary reflections on mourning.

Angéline's ultimate rejection of human consolations requires that they be presented as largely ineffective. It is no surprise that the well-meaning society ladies who offer condolences irritate rather than soothe her pain (99, 130). On the other hand, given the fact that Charles had entrusted his daughter's consolation to Maurice when they were engaged, one might expect Maurice to have more success as a consoler. In fact, Angéline does mention the consolatory power of the human sympathy she experienced with Maurice (140) as well as the comfort she takes in the sentimental romances he sings, but neither proves to be permanent. Maurice himself will later confess his disappointment as a consoler, telling Angéline that he felt at the deathbed scene "cette horrible impuissance à vous consoler" (183). The potential of Maurice's love to console her is also reduced by

the cooling of his affections after Angéline is disfigured by a fall. Once she becomes convinced that his love has turned to pity she breaks off her engagement and leaves Québec for Valriant, sure that no consolation is possible. Retreat and death dominate her thoughts: "se cacher, souffrir et mourir" (89) is her goal.

Maurice's failure, however, had been programmed by his prospective father-in-law. On his deathbed, Charles ignored his pact made with Maurice at the prenuptials: no mention is made of the consolations the marriage was to furnish. Instead, Charles confides his daughter to Christ, instituting the Saviour as Angéline's consoler. "Amour sauveur, répétait-il, je vous la donne. . . . O Seigneur Jésus, consolez-la" (95). Conan literally erased Maurice's promised role as consoler from the novel's second section, for when she revised the novel in 1905, she eliminated two passages found in the original 1881-82 version in which Charles explicitly confided his daughter to God *and* to Maurice.⁶

And as if acting out this new script written by Charles, Angéline does experience, at least temporarily, the consolations of religion at her father's deathbed. The rest of her novel records her struggle to allow these divine consolations to supersede human ones represented by Maurice's love. Gradually she comes to accept the devaluation of human attachments in the name of an exclusive love of God that had first been expressed in the novel by the Ursuline postulant Emma S. in her correspondence with Mina Darville (59). Mina will eventually follow Emma's lead and embrace a religious vocation that exemplifies the extreme separation from human ties. As Angéline puts it in a letter to Mina when Mina is approaching her own profession as an Ursuline: "Heureux ceux qui ne demandent rien aux créatures!" (101). While Angéline never enters the convent herself, she too follows Emma's example by her refusal to accept Maurice's final offer of marriage.

Indeed, the entire novel is placed under the sign of this total investment in love of the Creator at the expense of ties to creatures in its epigraph from Lacordaire: "L'avez-vous cru que cette vie fût la vie?" (15). This denigration of all things terrestrial took on an obsessive quality in the initial serial publication in *La Revue Canadienne* where the Lacordaire quotation was repeated at the head of each of the fourteen installments. This devaluation of the human in favor of the divine is also at the heart of the missionary's letter of consolation to Angéline in which he urges upon her his own example of preferring love of God to love of creatures: "A mesure qu'il [le missionnaire] s'éloigne des consolations humaines, Jésus-Christ se rapproche de lui" (176). Spurred on by the Oblate, she is confirmed in her resolution to "accomplir le grand commandement de l'amour" by her visit to the saint of Saint-Hyacinthe (180), and she burns the portrait of Maurice in her locket and writes him her final letter of adieu.

Henry Staten has pointed out in his discussion of Saint Augustine that such a rejection of the transitoriness of human ties in favor of the perma-

nence of divine love is rooted in a desire to avoid the pain of mourning. Angéline repeatedly cites with approval Augustine (53, 77, 174), whose distinction between the love of creatures and love of the Creator underlies her renunciation of marriage to Maurice, and she professes special regard for the saint's tender grief over the death of his mother and a friend (124). In the *Confessions* Augustine recounts learning from these two deaths how much human attachments expose one to the anguish of grief (4.4–12, 9.11–12). Since the loss of finite objects is inevitable, the pain of grieving their loss can best be avoided by reserving one's investment for the love of the infinite which is eternal (4.10–12). The rejection of the finite is an "anticipatory detachment of libido" (Staten 5), a sort of preventive strike that allows one to preclude the pain of mourning by refusing to form any attachments that might subsequently have to be grieved. Angéline articulates this rejection of the finite in a passage she quotes on November 6:

Malheur à qui laisse son amour s'égarer et croupir dans ce monde qui passe; car lorsque tout à l'heure il sera passé, que restera-t-il à cette âme misérable, qu'un vide infini, et dans une éternelle séparation de Dieu, une impuissance éternelle d'aimer. (180)

Angéline's treatment of Maurice is conditioned by this rejection of human attachments out of fear of losing them. Having just lost her father, when she perceives a cooling of Maurice's affections, she chooses to break with him rather than accept the fact that his love is no longer as passionate as during their courtship. In fact, his commitment had gradually matured as he focused on her personal qualities rather than on her physical appearance. But Angéline rejects this finite human love with all its shortcomings and the inevitable grief that must accompany it for divine love that promises the permanent intensity human love cannot provide.

In her last letter to Maurice she does not so much deny any power to the tender consolations of human love, as imply that she is called to the superior spiritual ones:

Sans doute, la bonté divine n'a pas voulu qu'elle [la vie] fût sans consolations, et nos pauvres tendresses restent le meilleur adoucissement à nos peines. Mais nul ne choisit sa voie et les adoucissements ne sont pas pour moi. (185)

Such spiritual consolations stand as a foretaste of heaven, a compensation for the anguish and doubts that her diary records. Indeed, the path of holiness has traditionally been seen as alternating between periods when the soul experiences distress and abandonment, and periods of exhilaration. Spiritual consolations can be considered interior delights that provide relief from the suffering felt in these moments of dejection; they include the joy that often, but not necessarily, accompanies spiritual exercises (Aumann 217–18). An addition Conan made to the 1905 edition confirms that Angéline expects to find spiritual consolations in the Eucharist to compensate for the sacrifice of human tenderness represented by Mau-

rice. Immediately following the last sentence quoted, Conan inserted a lengthy paragraph in which Angéline recounts for the second time her father's deathbed Communion. The reader had been prepared for this theme of eucharistic consolation by Angéline's recollection of the viaticum given her mother and Marc (154–55). Charles's prayer at his last Communion that Christ console his daughter, "O Seigneur Jésus, consolez-la, fortifiez-la," (185) was answered: "[A] cette heure d'agonie, une force, une douceur surnaturelle se répandit en mon âme" (185).

Thus, Angéline seems to have successfully undergone the consolatory cure prescribed by her father on his deathbed. Her grief work complete, a divine consolation experienced most intensely in the Eucharist will compensate for the isolation from human affection entailed by her disfigurement and her rejection of Maurice's human passion. She has successfully performed the Augustinian manoeuvre of alleviating grief by subordinating the human to the divine, thereby authorizing the pious readings of the novel that predominated for sixty years after its publication. *L'abbé Casgrain* set the tone in his preface to the 1884 edition when he described it as "un livre dont on sort comme d'une église, le regard au ciel" (8). From this point of view, the novel is all the more powerful for not hiding any of Angéline's struggle to overcome her love for Maurice or any of her doubts about the beneficence of providence.⁷

However, Angéline's sacrifice and its attendant consolation prove to be profoundly ambiguous. On further reflection, her claims to have accepted the loss of her beauty, of Maurice, and of her father are questionable.

Angéline's sacrifice of Maurice is in many ways only apparent. Convinced of the fickleness of masculine love by the fact that his affections had once cooled, she is perhaps justifiably skeptical of his renewed offer of marriage in his last letter. But as Tremblay (211) and Cotnam (160) have noted, by refusing marriage, Angéline has hit upon the one sure way to attach Maurice to herself permanently, for he pledges in his last letter that if he cannot marry her, he will remain alone the rest of his life (182).

Likewise, her grief work for her beauty seems incomplete. Maurice maintains that her disfigurement is no obstacle to their marriage: "Tôt ou tard, vous le savez, on ne jouit plus que des âmes. Et d'ailleurs, les traces de ce mal cruel vont s'effaçant chaque jour. Tout le monde le dit ici et pouvez-vous l'ignorer?" (182). Had she truly accepted the loss of her beauty, she might have been more receptive to Maurice's final insistence that his love sees past her disfigurement. Instead, Angéline will accept no middle ground between her former physical perfection and absolute repulsiveness; she takes the reclusiveness of the deformed Véronique Désileux as her model rather than adjust to her slow recovery.

Most important, her acceptance of Charles's death as the will of God is problematic. Even though the novel's third section opens immediately after she has broken off with Maurice some two and a half years following her father's death, its true momentum comes from her inability to

complete her grief work for her father. This is not surprising, given that Maurice describes her attachment to Charles as rivaling her devotion to God: "Elle vit en lui [Charles] un peu comme les saints vivent en Dieu" (16). Only once does Angéline acknowledge the immoderate nature of the love her father shared with her, but this avowal is crucial since it comes on the eve of the third anniversary of Charles's death at the time she was composing her letter to the missionary.

Si réglé qu'il soit, un cœur ardent reste bien immodéré. Il est si facile d'aller trop loin, par entraînement, par enivrement. Ne m'a-t-il [Charles] pas trop aimée? Bien des fois, je me le suis demandé avec tristesse." (160)

Her first reaction at Charles's deathbed had been to offer up her life if God would spare her father's: "Seigneur, je vous offrains tout pour racheter ses jours . . ." (95). Now on the third anniversary of Charles's death, when she finally acknowledges that he had loved her too much, she reflects on her willingness to offer herself to expiate her father's sins: "[A]vec quelle ardeur je m'offrais à souffrir tout ce qu'il devait à la justice divine. . . . Quand l'ennui me rendait folle, j'éprouvais une sorte de consolation à m'offrir pour que lui fût heureux" (159).

Her solution will be to offer up her love of Maurice to assure her father's salvation. On the surface, this sacrifice of a human attachment for a spiritual good allows her to resolve her double work of mourning in terms of a renewed religious commitment. But is not her concern for her father's salvation a sign that she refuses to give him up? This is seen most clearly in her presentiment in the novel's closing pages that her own death is not far away (180, 181, 186). To be sure, death was seen as desirable, both as a means of avoiding further temptation and of achieving union with God in the spirituality that pervades the "Feuilles détachées."⁸ Yet death was not just a sign of the vanity of "ce bonheur de la terre" (186) for Angéline; she welcomes it because it will make possible "la joie du revoir" (120), a speedy reunion with her father now that she is assured of his salvation. Any spiritual consolation she hopes to gain through this sacrifice is further compromised by her inability to acknowledge her own immoderate love for her father. She is content to say "je l'ai aimé autant que je pouvais aimer" (120), or "O Seigneur Jésus, vous le savez, ce n'est pas vous que je veux, ce n'est pas votre amour dont j'ai soif" (137) without questioning what Charles ab der Halden called her own "tendresse excessive . . . pour son père" (202) and Rosmarin Heidenreich described as "the sin of idolization of her father" (44). Thus, while the missionary had total confidence in the consolatory efficacy of the Eucharist ("Soyez-en sûr, la communion console de tout" [175]), Angéline herself finds only partial consolation: "la communion me fait du bien, m'apaise jusqu'à un certain point" (178).

In the final analysis, the Augustinian manoeuvre proves to be profoundly equivocal in Angéline's case. For Augustine, to prefer the eternal over

attachments to creatures allows one to minimize the pain of grieving the loss of the transitory. However, it is not certain whether Angéline truly seeks to avoid the suffering of grief or whether she completely renounces love of creatures. If Angéline takes over three years to reach even an apparent resolution of her grief for her father, it is because in some sense she finds satisfaction in mourning. What Colin Parkes calls the yearning and pining after the deceased that characterizes grief work (7) is her way of maintaining contact with her father. Likewise, her ostensible acceptance of Charles's death does not necessarily signal completion of her grief work through renunciation of a human attachment out of love of God. Rather than a way to end her mourning through resignation to the loss, her imminent death will allow her to end her mourning—not through the compensations of consolation that are somehow always less than the lost object, but by a restoration of the loss. Angéline will continue to enjoy the “milles pensées tristes et douces” (180) of melancholy in the short interval before her death makes possible this reunion. This lingering melancholy born of her unresolved mourning has fascinated recent readers who remained unconvinced that the spiritual consolations Angéline finds will bring her the serenity she seeks (181). Unable to complete her grief work, she will find freedom from her mourning only in death.

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA, LINCOLN

Notes

¹In the introduction to his translation of *Angéline*, Brunelle (xxviii-xxix) gives the most convenient history of the three states of text. The first state is represented by serialization in the 1881–1882 issues of *La Revue Canadienne*. The second state is the 1884 edition in which a number of passages from the first state were eliminated; I quote this state from a 1886 edition. More extensive revisions appear in the third and final state, published in 1905. Unless I specify otherwise, I cite the Fides edition of 1967 which gives this final state of the text.

²“Tous les motifs de l'œuvre se fondent en un thème unique: l'amour. Tel n'était probablement pas le but de l'auteur qui voulait surtout exploiter celui de la résignation dans l'épreuve” *Sœur Jean de l'Immaculée* (117); Mary Jean Green's reading of the novel searches for the motivation behind the heroine's “renunciation of love” (53).

³Charles ab der Halden connects the two emphasizing the power of religion to console: “Angéline consent enfin le sacrifice qu'elle avait accompli déjà, et qui lui semblait au delà de ses forces humaines. . . elle trouvera le mystique asile que le catholicisme offre aux âmes ardentes et blessées. L'amour divin la consolera des trahisons humaines” (200–01).

⁴Forms of the word *consolation* appear some thirty-two times in the novel: four in the first part, one in the second, and twenty-seven in the third, with their frequency increasing in the last stages of the book. Mourning has only occasionally been mentioned in connection with the novel. Amprizoz does not discuss it in his article on tears in the novel. Smart, on the other hand, does connect it with Angéline's effort to deal with her grief through writing (25, 50); Tremblay sees the diary as an extended act of contrition and examination of conscience that parallels her acceptance of her losses (207). Strangely, the many Freudian commentators do not develop the theme of mourning.

⁵For a useful overview of twentieth-century theories, Freudian and non-Freudian, see Cleiren 14–37.

⁶According to the 1884 text: "Quelques heures après il expirait,—encourageant, bénissant sa fille chérie, la recommandant à Dieu et à Maurice qu'il appelait son fils" (154). Three pages later in this edition Maurice is described as "celui à qui son père l'avait confiée en mourant" (157).

⁷In fact, so great is her crisis of faith that Patricia Smart has interpreted passages in which Angéline rebels against what she takes to be God's will as indications that what Angéline calls her "souillure" (119) is not the incest some recent critics have found in her relations with Charles, but her "inability to accept the teachings of her religion" (48). See Gallays for an overview of the incest issue.

⁸Conan, whom l'abbé Casgrain called "notre Eugénie de Guérin" (24), could have read in Eugénie's journal (which Angéline cites three times) an approbation of Pierre Lallament's *Les Saints Désirs de la mort* (Paris: Mabre-Cramoisy, 1673) in which death is lauded as a means of avoiding temptation and achieving union with God (220, 229–30). See Bourbonnais on the influence of Guérin.

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