

## Serge Patrice Thibodeau and the Sufi Encounter

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### Article abstract

Serge Patrice Thibodeau's poetry of the mid-1990s is striking as a reflection of the Acadian poet's strong attraction to Islamic spirituality and particularly Sufism. This is especially true in *Le quatuor de l'errance* and *La traversée du désert*, published jointly in 1995, and in *Dans la Cité* (1997). Thibodeau signals his affinity with Sufism through the epigraphs of *Le quatuor de l'errance*, most of which are taken from Sufi masters. The companion collection, *La traversée du désert*, contains no such epigraphs, but the integration of Sufi discourse is no less evident, establishing a clear continuity between the two collections that extends beyond their co-publication. The third volume, *Dans la Cité*, reintroduces two Sufi epigraphs (both by Ibn Arabi), interpolates Arabic script, and refers to Rumi and Ibn Arabi (along with John of the Cross) within the text.

# Serge Patrice Thibodeau and the Sufi Encounter

ÉMILE J. TALBOT

le soufi en qui fonder mon espoir  
— *La traversée du désert*

**A**CADIAN POET Serge Patrice Thibodeau, the author of eleven volumes of poetry since 1990 and the recipient of important poetry prizes, including the Prix Nelligan in 1992 and the Governor General's Award in 1996, is increasingly viewed as a major Canadian poetic voice.<sup>1</sup> While Thibodeau's formally varied and thematically wide-ranging verse invites broader commentary, this essay focuses on his poetry of the mid-1990s, which is striking as a reflection of the author's strong attraction to Islamic spirituality and particularly Sufism. This is especially true in *Le quatuor de l'errance* and *La traversée du désert*, published jointly in a single volume in 1995, and in *Dans la Cité*, published two years later.<sup>2</sup> Thibodeau signals his affinity with Sufism through the epigraphs of *Le quatuor de l'errance*, most of which are taken from Sufi masters.<sup>3</sup> The companion collection, *La traversée du désert*, contains no such epigraphs, but the integration of Sufi discourse is no less evident, establishing a clear continuity between the two collections that extends much beyond their having been published together in a single volume.<sup>4</sup> The third volume, *Dans la Cité*, reintroduces two Sufi epigraphs (both by Ibn Arabi), interpolates Arabic script, and refers to Rumi and Ibn Arabi (along with John of the Cross) within the text.

Thibodeau, who had previously written that Sufi poets and thinkers had gone the furthest in transforming the mystical experience into words (*L'appel des mots* 33), has acknowledged the contribution of Sufism to his understanding of poetry, attributing, for example, to Hazrat Inayat Khan the insight that all poets are, consciously or unconsciously, mystics (*L'appel des mots* 43; for the source text, see Khan 328). Referring to *La traversée*

*du désert*, he affirms that “mon but était de suivre les poètes mystiques de l’islam pour arriver à une écriture qui démontre que ce n’est pas moi qui écris. Ce n’est pas un talent ou un don mais quelque chose qui m’est prêté. Je dois faire honneur à celui qui me prête cela, au créateur, à Dieu. Je dois servir Dieu” (Laurin D1). The poet is a transmitter of intuitions that do not originate from him, a position he further articulates in “Seconde suite assyrienne,” the sixth poem of *Dans la Cité*: “*Ce que tu as reçu de Dieu — le Verbe — donne-le, offre-le, c’est la seule façon pour toi de le garder. Donne ce qui t’est prêté; tu le maîtriseras*” (96). Similar thoughts can be found in Rumi, who claimed that his imagery derived, ultimately, from God, for whom he was but a conduit (“Rain has come and I am the drainpipe”; “I am a flute and Thou art the Flutist” [Rumi 271; 272]), and in Khan who affirmed that “inspiration is always from the divine mind and to god alone the credit is due” (Khan 300). Such a concept of poetry allows for the possibility that the gift could be withdrawn, as Thibodeau senses in a moment of anguish at the end of *La traversée du désert*: “Tu reprends le Verbe, et je garde le tourment. Tu reprends ce par quoi je n’aurai pu Te servir” (255).

Part of a long tradition dating back to the Qur’an and Islamic revelation, Sufism, which developed a mystical exegesis beginning in the eighth century,<sup>5</sup> represents an inward spirituality that can serve as a counterweight to the external sha’ria. In addition to Islamic tradition, Sufism draws from Hindu, Greek, and Eastern Christian sources and has produced considerable sapiential discourse, which has frequently been interpreted as harboring antinomian tendencies and as blurring the distinction between creator and creature. To be sure, Sufism emphasizes inner purification over external conformity to law, but the mainstream tradition considers the law as a starting point for spirituality, which in turn infuses the law with meaning. Likewise, the otherness of God, a strong feature of Judaism and Christianity as well as Islam, with conceptual links to pre-Christian Greek religions, sometimes appears to be subsumed into an englobing concept of the unity of being in which all existents are part of the divine unity. Such is the teaching, for example, of the great Sufi masters such as Ibn Arabi, Shabistari, and Jami.<sup>6</sup> For this and other reasons, Sufism has at various times been viewed with suspicion by Muslim religious and political leaders, but these are the very features, as we shall see, that seem to attract Thibodeau. Within the compass of an article, it is not possible to do justice to the rich and complex tradition of Sufism, which has historical developments, cultural and geographic variants, and distinct fraternities and schools of thought, as well as a

highly developed technical lexicon. The movement is aptly characterized by Seyyed Hossein Nasr as “a vast garden in which are cultivated many flowers of different scents and colors (ix). In discussing Thibodeau’s encounter with Sufism, I am not suggesting that he adheres to this tradition, or that he has a profound knowledge of its intricacies, although there is ample evidence that his acquaintance is more than superficial.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, in some respects, he differs sharply from some fundamental theses of Sufism. Rather, I am proposing that Sufi discourse allows him to discover significant new resources in his quest for an encounter with the divine, and shapes his conception of self, transcendence, and sensuality.

By quoting René Char (“Je suis parti pour longtemps. Je revins pour partir” 7) in the opening epigraph of his first volume of poetry, *La Septième Chute*, Thibodeau emphasized the thematics of *errance*, which to this day has played a significant role in his writing, including his latest collection, *Que repose* (2004).<sup>8</sup> Part of *La Septième Chute* contains poems based on his journal written during a seven-month stay in Israel, while another, also inspired by travel, is organized around rivers (the Vistula, the Vltava, the Danube, the Seine, the Saint Lawrence). In Thibodeau’s following volume, *Le Cycle de Prague* (1992), *errance* leads the poet to the Czech capital (a city that also inspires his more recent volume, *Seuils* [2002]), which becomes the locus for an inner exploration. *Errance*, which implies a commitment to continued, unprogrammed geographical displacements as a way to truth, is represented as providing for a deepening of the self through the encounter with foreign spaces. Embedded in this earlier verse as well is a search for the ultimate other that lays the groundwork for the Sufi perspective of the following volumes. In an interview with Raymond Bertin, Thibodeau confided that, since 1991, he had envisaged “un projet d’écriture, où l’errance serait la métaphore de la quête religieuse” (Bertin 8). Since the theme of the journey, in evidence in his first two volumes, provides the metaphoric structure of much of Sufi spiritual discourse, it is not surprising that Thibodeau would appropriate a passage from the great medieval Andalusian Sufi master, Ibn Arabi, as the epigraph for the poem “Damas” in *Dans la Cité*: “Tu es à jamais voyageur, de même que tu ne peux t’établir nulle part” (55). The lead epigraph of *Dans la Cité*, also taken from Ibn Arabi, speaks to the value “de parcourir la terre pour méditer” (9). In quoting the Afghan poet Sayd Bahodine Majrouh in the epigraph to the prologue of *Le quatuor de l’errance*, Thibodeau affirms that the role of *errance* is meaning, rather than Pascalian diversion: “Ami de

l'égarement, place ton pas dans le pas qui déchiffre le sens ... Cherche l'exil, son sens, et ton pourquoi sera comblé" (13).

In the fourth canto of *Le quatuor de l'errance*, Thibodeau informs his readers that in Persian, a single word, *rewendeh*, means both a traveller and a contemplative (125), a dual meaning he clearly cherishes. The notion of the voyager as contemplative implies a willingness to allow time for tranquility:

Apprendre à compatir, ne pas me ruer, malhabile, vers la sagesse.

...

Prendre le temps de ralentir, le temps de m'arrêter.

Prendre le Temps.

De cesser toute activité impose le Verbe, le poème,  
l'amour même. (*Le quatuor* 16)

Sufism emphasizes patience, the willingness to wait for the encounter, considering, in Hazrat Inayat Khan's words, that, "Repose is the secret of all contemplation and meditation" (Khan 75). "The mind," as the Sri Lankan Sufi Muhaiyadeen put it, "must be allowed to rest" (Narayan 88).

The poet's movements from India through Nepal, Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, and Greece in *Le quatuor de l'errance*,<sup>9</sup> in Jordan and Jerusalem in *La traversée du désert*, and in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Egypt in *Dans la Cité*, increasingly represent spiritual journeys ("Oh! Partir au désert y entendre Sa Voix" [*Dans la Cité* 51]). The poet's journeys are designed to extricate him from an enveloping sense of void, the "absence au beau milieu du manque" that is descriptive of the personal emptiness of a man with "une pierre dans la poitrine" (*Le quatuor* 16, 17). Towards the end of the prologue of *Le quatuor de l'errance*, the poet understands that only transcendence can bring about fulfillment, though he is aware of both the nearness and the illusiveness of God — "Et Dieu se fait proche, et Dieu nous échappe" (21) — a sentence that he will repeat six times in the following volume.

To be conscious of being at a spiritual threshold, as is the poet in the prologue to *Le quatuor de l'errance*, is, however, anxiety producing: "La conscience d'un seuil me trouble; oser, ne pas oser le franchir, / Y laisser trop d'illusions; l'heure du choix n'a pas sonné. / Attendre la quête? le signal de l'ardente et pénible quête?" (22). What if he crosses the threshold and submits completely to God's will? What might be the consequences?:

Le renoncement, ensuite la joie?

Le chagrin malgré la soumission à Sa Volonté, à l'esprit  
de Ses Lois?

Devant la porte ouvragée, brûler du même feu, gracié? (22)

The phrase “La conscience d’un seuil” is repeated (23) to mark the reality of his hesitation. Yet, there is a call here, coming from the mountain (“À l’horizon, la Montagne d’où me parvient, faible, un echo” 23), which will lead to the beginning of the ascent in the first canto.

At this juncture, we need to pay attention to Thibodeau’s frequent use of the word “appel” (about two dozen times in the three volumes). The image of the call occupies a prominent space in many religious traditions, but Islam has raised it above the level of metaphor in the actual call to prayers by the muezzin. It is to the call of the muezzin that Thibodeau refers whenever he writes “appel” beginning with a lower case “a.” His most frequent use, however, capitalizes the initial letter, so that “Appel” becomes the call from the divine: “S’il est un Appel, le Son, c’est que Tu es l’Union, l’Aimé, l’Unique” (34). This deeper call, a communication to the inner self from a transcendent subject, is one he must be ready to heed (78, 86, 199, 209). Yet, it may be silent (70, 255), may not always be easy to hear among the sounds of daily life (32, 108), and cannot be received without anxiety (“face à la mort, redouter son Appel” 35). In *Dans la Cité*, it is characterized as a voice (“Sa Voix” 34, 51; “Ta Voix” 65). The call may also be embedded in song (“la Source du Chant” in *Le quatuor* 42, 69), such as the *qawwali* (75), the religious chants that stimulate his desire to encounter the eternal sound: “cette envie légitime / De quitter ce monde pour habiter le Son éternel” (75). An ontological synesthesia ensues in which the sound of the absolute becomes visible: “Je me fonds en l’Absolu: le voile se soulève / J’entends ce qui est invisible, je me dépouille, je vois le Son” (111). These words echo Hazrat Inayat Khan’s contention that “The voice is not only audible but visible to those who can see it” (93). Khan, whom Thibodeau seems to have read carefully, further affirms that “those who can see can trace colors even in that which is audible and which is called sound” (39). The call, however defined or characterized, highlights the presence of a transcendental Other who takes the initiative in soliciting the relationship.

The centrality of the spiritual quest is particularly manifest in “l’ascension de la montagne,” the first canto of *Le quatuor de l’errance*, in which Thibodeau relates his ascent to the sacred mountain (“la Montagne sainte” 39) as the place for experiencing the ultimate mystery (“Je reconnais Sa

Présence” 49). The ascent to the mountain as a trope for the encounter with transcendence is, of course, common to the discourse of many religious traditions, and not a particularly Islamic motif, a commonality not lost on the poet who, in referring to his encounter with “le superbe triangle de sa présence sacrée” (39), appropriates an image of Christian theology. As in other traditions, the meeting with the ultimate mystery requires a suspension of the intellect (30, 31) that allows the poet to experience a harmony with others and with God (“Rien ne nous sépare l’un de l’autre, rien ne nous sépare de Dieu” 42) in an experience that destabilizes the boundaries between self and non-self. This had been the goal expressed in the prologue: “rejoindre l’Autre sans craindre l’écart” (19). All demarcations, all contours, are now negated (44).

While the geography of this canto is Nepal, and while there are passing references to material Buddhism (“les chants des lamas” 29; “les robes safran” 33; “la robe amarante d’un lama” 35), the insistence on the unitive state closely parallels Sufi discourse. The notion of the unity of being is Qur’anicly based, but was much developed by successive generations of Sufi writers to become a key part of their doctrine that everything is a part/mode/aspect of the encompassing Divine Unity. For a small minority of Sufis, God is the only reality — there is no being but His being — so that the personal contact with the divine becomes a realization of being part of that same reality. The poetic subject’s mystical encounter centres on a non-dual experience (“S’il est un Appel, le Son, c’est que Tu es l’Union, l’Aimé, l’Unique” 34), as he is infused with a sense of being part of a unified being (“Le principe même de l’Unité” 41; “Ô le geste unitif d’un jour” 46; “Et l’Union est parfaite” 53). In *Dans la Cité*, published two years later, the Sufi lexicon of unification still informs his spiritual reflection: “Le vent proclame de là-haut l’essence de l’Unique”; “Instigateur des formes de la création, de l’Union la plus totale, la plus dépouillée, avec la nuit à créer” (30); “le désir de l’Unique” (35). The unitive state cancels all other realities, including temporality (“le temps s’est dissous” in *Le quatuor* 65) and even the mountain itself (“La Montagne n’a jamais existé” 42).

Thibodeau refuses, however, to fold nature and God into a single cosmic reality, keeping in mind that there is a being at the origin of creation who is distinct from creation: “Ô Toi, l’Origine!” (64). Unlike a Buddhist, whose encounter with being-in-itself involves a melding into nothingness, Thibodeau’s experience parallels mainstream Sufi thought, which, while devalorizing the distinction between creature and creator, insists that the

communion is indeed with a distinct creator, namely God. As Fakhruddin 'Iraqi put it in verse,

Make no mistake  
 he who is lost  
 in God  
 is not God himself. (99)

Most varieties of Sufism reject *ittihad*, the notion that two entities coming together can become a single entity, as heresy. The unitive state preserves a residual subjectivity in what remains a relational encounter. Thibodeau's poetic subject is engaged with "Toi" (*Le quatuor* 34), an entity endowed with personhood. He returns from the mountain eager to "exulter dans la nouveauté sacrée / De ce qui m'enflamme d'amour, de ce qui m'appelle vers Lui" (53). The mystical experience cannot be permanent — all religious traditions concur on this point — and the participant necessarily transitions back from what mystical discourse calls "liminality" into ordinary life, transformed, bringing with him part of the experience ("Le vertige atteint celui qui descend" 48) and grateful for its prolongation ("J'accueille le prolongement de l'Union" 65).

*Le quatuor de l'errance* is sequentially structured as a voyage, in line with the Sufi understanding of spirituality as a journey, without, however, paralleling the stations on the Sufi path. The encounter occurs in the first canto ("L'ascension de la montagne") while the following cantos ("Le passage dans la vallée"; "La descente dans la caverne"; "La traversée du désert") relate the stages of withdrawal from the mystical state. The poet must come to terms with the realization that unity with the divine encountered on the mountain is dissolving, that the intensity cannot be sustained, and that the gap between creature and creator is reasserting itself. The spiritual encounter is now referred to in the past tense: "J'ai voulu vivre en Ta présence" (125). The ardor seems to have waned on both sides:

Où Tu Te trouves, Tu me fuis; dans les yeux du passant,  
 Je ne vois plus Ton visage, en moi la surdit , l'Appel en  
 Fuite,  
 Et Te cherchant, Tu m' vites,  a n'en vaut plus la peine. (126)

Yet the poet continues to experience an important presence ("Au fond de moi, l'ind niable pr sence de Dieu" 132) and eagerly waits for God to make a gesture: "Qu'il m'offre la gr ce, et je tendrai ma main. Sans recul" (129). Addressing God directly, he proclaims his openness to renewing the relation-



ship: “je me tairai, je le promets, je me tairai pour entendre Ta Voix” (145). That voice suddenly returns in the third volume, while he is in Beirut: “Oh l’Appel! tu entend l’Appel et l’espoir te revient!” (*Cité* 49). Towards the end of *La traversée du désert*, he had already proclaimed his confidence in a final, permanent union with the divine :

Un jour, *incha’Allah!* Je connaîtrai la paix, et ce jour-là,  
*Macha’Allah!*  
 Tu m’auras épargné le retour, car Tu est le Centre, Tu es  
 le Discours,  
 Et nous serons unis pour l’éternité, comme la pierre et le feu. (240)

Although a Sufi perspective informs all of *Le quatuor de l’errance*, in the narrative sequence of the collection, the encounter with Islam occurs only in the second canto, after the descent, somewhere in Afghanistan:

La devotion est un acte tangible; un moujahidin,  
 chaleureusement,  
 Me prend la main, un banni veut que j’embrasse l’islam.  
 Je lui promets d’effleurer les versets du Qur’an.  
 L’attrait de l’étrange exilé me confond, je me soumetts à  
 l’unique Splendeur,  
 Et répète trois fois les sept mots: *La ilaha illa’Llah,*  
*Mohammed rasulu’Llah,*  
 Le cœur migrant, nous nous abreuvons de cette *Lumière sur*  
*lumière!* (61)

While Thibodeau does not identify it as such, this last phrase, “*Lumière sur lumière,*” which he will repeat in *Dans la Cité*, is a quotation of a celebrated verse of the Qur’an (24:35) that has long informed Islamic mystical discourse. In the Qur’an he finds that “chaque verset rapproche d’Allah, sinon du cœur même de l’homme” (78). Such words, as well as his quotation of the *shahada* and the Qur’an above represent a willingness to appropriate a practice that he perceives as capable of assisting him in communicating with the ultimate mystery. Crucially, it does not entail adherence to a creed.

Integral to this spiritual quest is a strong yearning for freedom that separates him from Sufis, for whom the liberation sought is from the bonds of the *nafs*, the ego-self, sometimes translated as the lower or carnal self, as opposed to the spirit. For Thibodeau, freedom is liberation from *all* bonds, including those of prescriptive morality, a position he makes clear in *La traversée du désert*:

Je revendique pour mon insouciance tous les tabous du  
monde,  
Toutes les interdictions, les créneaux temporels de tous  
les délits. (206)

In the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions, sin or transgression is the marker of difference between God and man, a theological position etched in the Western imagination through the Genesis narrative. In rejecting norms that would define transgression, Thibodeau seeks to overcome that difference.<sup>10</sup> Antinomian sentiments (“et surtout, surtout, ne pas obéir” 20) do not, however, imply an abandonment of ethical considerations in this poet, who is attempting to carve a moral sphere beyond the parameters of human or divine command ethics. The removal of boundaries (“Oh! de pouvoir écrire ces mots: le bonheur sans limites” 42) accords him the emancipation from constraint yearned for in his earlier volumes, though at a higher level than he had originally sought. In the solitude at the top of the mountain, the direct contact with the source of being produces an ontological freedom akin to the Sufi belief that the mystical encounter restores a lost harmony that surpasses the quest for moral freedom even as it encompasses that quest.

While drawing from various religious traditions, Thibodeau rejects all mediation in his quest for the infinite, a refusal expressed in his criticism of the church in *L'appel des mots* for its “arrogance outrancière à vouloir gérer les libertés individuelles et collectives” (30), as well as in his first volume of poetry, *La Septième Chute*:

entre Dieu et moi,  
qu'on se le dise: la place est prise  
personne  
en aucun lieu aucun temps aucun homme  
ni même aucun Livre (événement)  
entre Dieu  
et moi: que l'Amour. (154)

This refusal is repeated in *Le quatuor de l'errance* as a rejection of the mediation of Islam:

La voix du muezzin dévoile  
l'appel,  
Un appel que je n'entends pas. Aucun homme n'élèvera  
la voix,  
N'édifiera sa carrure entre Dieu et moi: je suis un  
homme libre. (92)

This stance puts him at odds with the Sufi belief in the necessity of a master to guide the spiritual wayfarer.<sup>11</sup> While Sufi teachers affirm that the ultimate encounter with the divine is unmediated, and even that Sufism itself “is the subsistence of the heart with God without any mediation” (see Bhatnagar 13), that union cannot be achieved unaided. Thibodeau, however, will have no guide: “J’écarte gentiment l’effronterie / des mollahs” (63). In his interview with Danielle Laurin, Thibodeau specifies that when he wrote “Ô splendide message de l’islam” (see *Le quatuor* 155), he was referring to the literal meaning of “islam” in Arabic, namely “submission to God’s will” (Laurin D2). Notably, for this poet prone to use graphemic markers to underscore important concepts, he never writes “islam” with an upper case “I.” Submission to a human authority is an infringement on human freedom, an intrusion formally rejected in the line “Je renonce au baptême, je m’en affranchis. Seul, seul / avec Dieu” (*Le quatuor* 199).

In opposition to Sufism, which preaches control over the *nafs* and the transcendence of worldly desires, Thibodeau seeks to erase the opposition between the flesh and the spirit to insist that sensuality and spirituality are not opposites but complements.<sup>12</sup> This accommodation is never perfect, and the age-old opposition between flesh and spirit sporadically resurfaces. In the fourth canto of *Le quatuor*, for example, relating experiences in Christian Greece, the poet reveals his uneasiness that the flesh is drawing him away from the God encountered on the mountain: “les lois du corps sont inévitables, / Et je m’éloigne de toi, ô mon Aimé!” (125). His use of Luke 6:46 (“Pourquoi m’appellez-vous Seigneur, Seigneur, et ne faites pas ce que je dis” 123) as one of the epigraphs for this canto may express a lingering uncertainty regarding the legitimation of sensuality. However, his desire “pour des hanches solides et l’instant d’un orgasme!” (101), his “bouche rêveuse d’un corps” (126), represents yearnings that spirituality need not constrain. The desire for man and the desire for God coexist: “Ô soif! la soif de l’homme et la soif du Dieu de l’homme!” (*La traversée* 173). In *La traversée du désert* and *Dans la Cité* particularly, the spiritual quest increasingly finds expression through sensual and even erotic language and imagery, a procedure that both Christian mystics and Sufi poets have used effectively to represent the experiential relationship with the divine. Sufis consider human love to be “derivative love” and refer to God as the Beloved — *l’Aimé* in French translations, a term used repeatedly by Thibodeau. Nor is the gender of the lover specifically identified, although he appears to be male, a feature also

found in some Sufi poetry, where the male gender is used to refer to the lover (Sedgwick 7) who metaphorically represents the divine.<sup>13</sup>

Much of what attracts Thibodeau to Sufi discourse is also present in the long tradition of Christian mysticism, as readings of Meister Eckhart, Theresa of Avila, and John of the Cross, to mention only a few, will attest. Yet Thibodeau, whose experience of Christianity had failed to provide him with an experiential relationship with the ultimate mystery, chose to go beyond his religious tradition and to Sufism in particular for spiritual fulfillment. In doing so, he disconnects Sufism from Islam, a strategy that some Sufi writers popular in the West, such as Hazrat Inayat Khan (frequently referenced in *L'appel des mots*), Indries Shah, and Bawa Muhaiyadeen would allow,<sup>14</sup> and as some Western commentators have affirmed,<sup>15</sup> but this disconnect is rejected by most Muslims. As Thibodeau had explained in *L'appel des mots*, the mystical path makes possible a spirituality without the normative ideology of religion (*L'appel* 29). In discarding the metanarrative of Christianity without exchanging it for a competing metanarrative, Thibodeau articulates the experience of those attempting to create a space for spirituality within postmodernity.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Other prizes include the Prix France-Acadie in 1991, the Prix Edgar-Lespérance (for his critical essay, *L'Appel des mots. Lecture de Saint-Denys Garneau*, 1993), the Grand Prix du festival international de la poésie (Trois-Rivières, 1996), and the Prix Antonine-Maillet (2005).

<sup>2</sup> Thibodeau rejected Catholicism at the age of seventeen when, during a midnight mass in Africa, he witnessed a priest warn those in his congregation who were not baptized not to approach the communion table (Laurin D1). His poetry is not, however, without occasional references to Christian scripture, incidental phraseology drawn from Christian practice, and passing Christological allusions.

<sup>3</sup> One epigraph derives from the Jewish tradition (Proverbs 20:24) and another from the Christian tradition (Luke 6:46).

<sup>4</sup> Robert Proulx has underscored that continuity by pointing out that the words of the prologue to *Le quatuor de l'errance* reappear in the closing pages of *La traversée du désert* (Proulx 79).

<sup>5</sup> On the development of Sufism, see Renard, and Sedgwick.

<sup>6</sup> Some Sufi writers, such as Ahmad Sirhindi, warn that mystical utterances implying fusion between creature and creator must be taken metaphorically, lest there be blasphemy. See Renard 250.

<sup>7</sup> The first chapter of Thibodeau's critical essay on Saint-Denys Garneau, published two years earlier, makes numerous references to Sufism, which informs his discussion of "mysticité" (see *L'appel* 25–53).

<sup>8</sup> See, as well, another recent volume, *Du haut de mon arbre* (2002), intended for an adolescent

readership, which ends with the words “c’est patiemment que j’attends le tout prochain voyage” (137). Thibodeau’s poetic imagination is not tied to a specific nation and geography. Although the plight of the Acadian people constitutes section VIII of “nomades” in *La traversée du désert*, only one of Thibodeau’s collections of poetry, *Nous, l’étranger* (1995), revolves around specifically Acadian themes. In his essay, “Poésie acadienne: un espace à circonscrire” (1994), Thibodeau proposes theoretical parameters for discerning what might be called “Acadian” poetry. For a broad reflection on Thibodeau’s Acadianness, see Chovrelat, and Morency. With the exception of the second section of *Nocturnes* (1997) and *Le Passage des glaces* (1992), where various references indicate that the poet is speaking from within an apartment, perhaps even a single room, Thibodeau’s space is hardly ever static. For a collection of his prose travel narratives, principally on Europe and the Americas, see his *Lieux cachés* (2005).

<sup>9</sup>For a discussion of *Le quatuor de l’errance* as a traveler’s discourse, see Beaulieu. For an insightful study of its composition and structure, see Proulx.

<sup>10</sup>For a broad discussion of faith in relation to the otherness of God, see Westphal.

<sup>11</sup>For a discussion of the role of the shaykh, or guide, see Sedgwick 25–27; 31–35; 45–56.

<sup>12</sup>For a more extensive discussion of this issue, see Talbot.

<sup>13</sup>Ambiguities in language further contributed to confusion regarding gender. As William C. Chittick explains it, “one should mention the ‘shaded-baz,’ the person who is ‘devoted to witnesses,’ he who occupies himself with the contemplation of their beauty. Because of the various levels of meaning of the word ‘witness’ in Persian literature, *shaded-baz* may sometimes mean ‘lover of boys’ in a homosexual sense. More often, it refers to him who is devoted to contemplating beauty in human form” (Chittick in Rumi 289).

<sup>14</sup>Muhaiyadeen, who was active in the United States in the 1970s, clearly stated this position: “Sufism is a clear pure essence that has been filtered and has settled deep within. It is not something that belongs to any one religion. It is an essential truth filtered out of all four religions, by wisdom” (Narayan 5). For Indries Shah, “formal religion is for the Sufi merely a shell, though a genuine one, which fulfills a function” (Shah 26).

<sup>15</sup>Consider, as an example, Robert Graves’s assertion: “Though commonly mistaken for a Moslem sect, the Sufis are at home in all religions ... and bound by no religious dogma” (“Introduction” in Shah ix).

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