

## Haunting Love in Anne Hébert's *Les fous de Bassan* and Mary Novik's *Conceit*

Though the two novels hail from different socio-historical and linguistic traditions, Québec author Anne Hébert's *Les fous de Bassan* (1982) and Canadian author Mary Novik's *Conceit* (2007) demonstrate striking similarities when it comes to their staging of haunting.<sup>1</sup> Hébert's novel—a keystone of the Québec literary canon—is of course the better known of the two works. Divided into six sections narrated by five different characters,<sup>2</sup> *Les fous de Bassan* recounts the events leading up to the murder of two adolescent cousins, Olivia and Nora Atkins, in the Protestant village of Griffin Creek in the summer of 1936. One of the sections is narrated by Olivia's ghost, whose "text" is signed "Olivia de la Haute Mer." This spectral Olivia inhabits an all-female oceanic realm, where the voices of her female ancestors caution her against voyaging back to Griffin Creek. The ghosts have good cause to warn her, for Griffin Creek is rife with violence towards women, of which the most obvious example is the 1936 murder. However, because Olivia is drawn to her cousin Stevens, the murderer who threw her body into the ocean, she returns repeatedly to that traumatic telluric space in search of him. While she claims not to find him ("the one I am seeking is no longer here" [149]),<sup>3</sup> Stevens himself indicates in his last letter to his friend Old Mic that he is indeed haunted by both Olivia and Nora.<sup>4</sup> Mary Novik's novel—published in 2007 to warm critical reception<sup>5</sup>—focuses primarily on the character of Pegge Donne, daughter of the Jacobean poet and Protestant clergyman John Donne. Pegge is haunted by the ghost of her mother, Ann, who died at thirty-three while giving birth to her twelfth child, and whose bitter ghost narrates a few first-person sections of the novel.

In these sections, Ann expresses her anger towards her husband with regard to the gendered, passive role he expected her to play in their relationship. Pegge herself also plays the role of the revenant in the novel, impersonating her mother in her relationships with her father, her unrequited love interest, Izaak Walton, and her husband, as well as in her literary endeavours.

Both Hébert's and Novik's novels portray female revenants who have suffered the violence of patriarchal relationships and whose intervention draws attention to flawed gender binaries. In both, the spectral desire of the female character is expressed through a poetic language that disrupts patriarchal discourse. Both novels also depict a daughter who is at once the agent and the object of haunting. Perhaps what is most interesting, however, is the important role that love plays in spectrality in the two novels. Indeed, Olivia and Pegge express a strong desire to experience love, and when its possibility is disrupted or destroyed by patriarchal discourse or practice, the feminine spectral apparition appears as though to highlight this loss.

As Julia Kristeva writes in *Tales of Love*, "The psyche is one open system connected to another, and only under these conditions is it renewable. If it lives, your psyche is in love" (15). Kristeva is describing a basic psychic need: the loving connection to the other. The love that nurtures the psyche, according to her theories, involves a "heterogeneous" process (15, 17), the destabilizing but enriching integration of the other into the self. This type of love is "a state of instability in which the individual is no longer indivisible and allows him [or her]self to become lost in the other, for the other" (4). For Kristeva, the stagnation of this love is analogous to death: "If [the psyche] is not in love, it is dead" (15). The haunting that Olivia and Pegge experience and enact is the flipside of this loving connection: a living death, love's shadowy underbelly. The open system to which Kristeva refers—the integration of other into self, and its correlative, the integration of self into other—is blocked by the fissure of inherited gendered psychic wounds that Olivia and Pegge either experience or to which they bear witness. In Olivia's case, the violence that pervades Griffin Creek will ultimately lead to her (literal/material) death, but this death will leave her in a state of suspended psychic animation. Indeed, it is in this ghostly state that she expresses her deep longing for the other, Stevens. As for Pegge, she hears the voice of her dead mother when she is most engrossed in a romanticized and therefore misogynistic vision of love, a vision that mirrors the relationships described in her father's poetry. In the case of both Olivia and Pegge, the heterogeneous love that Kristeva describes is foreclosed. This article will privilege the

figure of the daughter as medium and revenant in order to examine the complex relationship between love, gender, and haunting in the two novels, for regardless of Olivia's and Pegge's part in the ghostly encounter, in each instance the revenant is conjured or ignored, embodied or expelled, from within the damaged space of the couple.

### **Olivia: The Haunted Revenant<sup>6</sup>**

Olivia de la Haute Mer—despite having suffered through rape and murder—is far from a vengeful ghost. On the contrary, she is plaintive, nostalgic. She is also full of desire, and it is this desire that hauls her up from the depths of the ocean (149), despite her female ancestors' warnings, and deposits her on the shore of the murder where she is confronted with her past. In this section of the novel, Olivia revisits a childhood moment spent with Stevens on the beach. The young Olivia is ebullient, “made for life, from the tips of her nails to the roots of her hair” (153), a description that stands in stark contrast to her later fear and cautiousness in the presence of men. The reconstruction establishes Stevens' character before he becomes violent and murderous: instead of thinking in terms of the possession and abjection of his female counterpart—as he will do when he grows older—Stevens is able to take joy in Olivia's presence and admire the sandcastles she has created. The encounter is characterized by sensuality, mutual happiness, and openness. “Who will be the first to shout with joy in the wind, amid the clamor of the sea birds?” Olivia wonders as she watches the scene unfold in her memory (153). Here the misogyny that Stevens demonstrates as an adult is entirely absent.<sup>7</sup> He is sensual, gentle, and curious with regard to the other:

Now he is crouching in the sand before her. Looks closely at the sand castles. Looks closely at the little girl. Doesn't know which he admires more, the sand heaped up in tidy rows or the little girl herself, who has built it all. She is breathing against his shoulder, hiding behind her bangs. With his fingertips he grazes the little girl's cheek. The little girl's cheek is cool as a shadow. (153)

The omniscient point of view of the passage is worth noting: though the scene is recounted in the section of the novel entitled “Olivia de la Haute Mer,” the point of view is not exclusively Olivia's: it shifts between first-person and third-person omniscient. Thus, the reader is privy not only to Olivia's (subjective) perception of the young Stevens, but also to the more objective view held by the narrator. This narrative detail is important, for it prevents the reader from assuming that Stevens' gentleness in the early years is pure projection on Olivia's part.

Olivia's longing for Stevens may come as a surprise to the reader—one would expect her to feel anger towards her murderer. Her feelings are explained, however, by the fact that Stevens was not always hateful and violent. As a ghost, Olivia mourns the loss of the boy she once knew. The scene on the beach also serves as an important turning point in the novel and a microcosm of the problematic gender dynamics that pervade Griffin Creek. Although it begins with a positive interaction between the two characters, the potential for love is quickly destroyed by paternal violence:<sup>8</sup> Stevens' father swoops down and shakes the boy like a tree in a storm (154) because he didn't respond to his father calling his name. This act of violence represents a point of rupture in Olivia's memory, the moment where the videotape begins to rewind itself in order to record new content: "Too many old images, colors, sounds . . . He whistled for him, like a dog. No, I won't tolerate it. Let us leave this shore. Let memories disappear in the sand . . . Flee. Rejoin the tide as it draws back to the deep water's highest point" (154). Male violence triggers Olivia's retreat into the protective realm of the feminine, but the above passage also demonstrates her ambivalence with regard to fleeing Stevens and Griffin Creek. The first few words ("Too many old images, colors, sounds") evoke her desire to relive the loving encounter with Stevens, and the first-person negation that follows ("No, I won't tolerate it") at once acts as an acknowledgement and a denial of the destruction of that love. Finally, the first-person plural imperative ("Let us leave this shore. Let memories disappear in the sand") signals Olivia's escape back into the collective, feminine aquatic space, but also reveals her sense of regret and loss, for this withdrawal marks the relinquishment of the possibility of a loving relationship with the other.

The mistreatment that the young Stevens endures on the beach is in fact part of a larger pattern of paternal abuse in the novel. When Olivia returns to Griffin Creek, she reconstructs not only the scenes in which Stevens plays a prominent role—thus betraying her desire to slip closer to him—but also those that suggest that her mother was mistreated by her father. Here the reader observes the same sort of voluntary amnesia<sup>9</sup> that marks Olivia's reaction to the episode on the beach. In one of these scenes, the teenaged Olivia discovers bruises on her mother's body, and the reader comes to understand that the father's violence is at the origin of these marks. Referring to these bruises, André Brochu has furthermore pointed out that the mother's mysterious death most likely occurred at the father's hand (183). However, although it is Olivia who, in her narrative, provides the details leading to this interpretation, she nonetheless seems to have

repressed the knowledge of this ultimate violence. Thus, when she examines the scenes from her past and thinks, “If I look carefully, . . . [t]he mystery of my mother’s life and death will have no more secrets from me” (157), she is searching for a truth that has always been there before her, and to which she has voluntarily blinded herself.

Throughout Olivia’s narrative is threaded a tension between the lure of love and the knowledge that it will inevitably be rendered impossible by violence. The female ancestors express themselves at moments where the tension between these two forces is at its highest: Olivia’s mnemonic slide towards Stevens causes the voices to grow increasingly insistent in their admonitions. I count five instances in Olivia’s text of this kind of ghostly warning (160, 161, 163, 164, 165), in addition to the use of the spectral “nous” that blends the daughter’s voice with that of the ancestral women (152, 154, 155, 161); in each case, the “nous” form is employed to indicate the urgent need to flee patriarchal violence. Neil Bishop describes this ancestral voice as that of a “*féminin-féministe*.” According to Bishop, the voice speaks to “le refus, par les femmes, de la tendance sadique des hommes à leur endroit, cette attitude sexiste si manifeste chez Stevens” (126). Bishop’s position is reinforced by the fact that the ancestral women defy certain gender stereotypes. Although they play traditional feminine roles (Olivia describes her female ancestors as “patient women, ironers, washerwomen, cooks, wives, pregnant, giving birth, mothers of the living and the dead” [159-160]), they are also “desiring and desired in the bitter wind” (160), that is to say, at once the subjects and objects of desire. Felicity Jones, Olivia’s aptly named grandmother, is perhaps the best example of a “feminist” character in *Les fous de Bassan*, one whose inner life is rich and desire-filled. “Sharper than salt” (25), Felicity demonstrates her independence and self-sufficiency by spending each morning on the beach, radiantly content in her solitude. She is one of the many female ancestors whose counsel Olivia hears over the course of the narrative.

However, while the female ancestors certainly raise their collective voice and denounce the misogyny of the men of Griffin Creek, they do not propose any solutions to the relational problems that plague them, aside from a retreat into their exclusively feminine community:

My mother and grandmothers moan in the wind, swear that they’ve warned me. I had only to flee before Stevens even gazed at me with his child’s eyes. Those women talk drivel, keep repeating the same thing. Drops of rain on the water’s surface, they sink into the black depths of the sea, counsel me henceforth to dwell there with them, to be obedient and not make use of the tide to return to Griffin Creek. (163)

According to the ancestors, the only possibility open to Olivia is an “obedient” escape into their own realm. Olivia’s mother, on her deathbed, also asks her daughter to be obedient—in this case, she is referring to an attitude of self-effacement and domesticity (“she made me swear to be obedient and take care of the house” [156]), even though this is the very problem that has led to the mother’s own demise. Not surprisingly, Olivia’s efforts to follow her mother’s advice leave her feeling secluded and controlled. While her father is “all taken up with his mental calculations of the price of milk and potatoes” (156), her brothers “[m]erely stand on guard around [her], keeping [her] a prisoner in the house” (156). A living death under patriarchal rule is the mother’s legacy to her daughter, and thus Olivia’s murder renders concrete a much earlier symbolic death. By the time Olivia becomes Olivia de la Haute Mer—by the time she narrates her story and thus adds her voice to the chorus of spectral female voices that ring through Griffin Creek—she has already played the role of the ghost, having assumed the deadly feminine position that her mother left vacant.

The mother’s death, according to Anne Ancrenat, opens up a feminine communication that challenges patriarchal discourse: “La petite fille, en perdant sa mère biologique, gagne le pouvoir d’entendre l’infra-langue maternelle (cette voix multiple des femmes qui ne s’érige pas à partir du seul discours patriarcal) intransmissible à partir du lieu de la famille dont elle doit s’exiler” (*De mémoire de femmes* 22). However, Olivia’s mother hands down this very discourse, and it is not called into question by the voice of the ancestral women, who favour the same gender binaries that are upheld by the men of Griffin Creek. Theirs is far from a “feminine-feminist” voice, and it is perhaps for this reason that Olivia does not always take comfort in it. “Who watches over me now, spies on me rather and constantly troubles me?”<sup>10</sup> she wonders after having sworn to her dying mother that she will remain obedient to her father. The mother and other female ancestors “watch over” Olivia—“spy” on her—but they seem to do so in order to ensure the enforcement of an ancient patriarchal law and the continuation of feminine segregation.

### **Pegge: Her mother’s daughter?**

The collective ancestral voice in Anne Hébert’s novel is a source of disquiet for Olivia. In the case of Mary Novik’s novel, on the other hand, the female revenant is welcome: Pegge conjures her mother’s ghost because she believes her to be a potential source of sexual knowledge. When her younger sister begins to menstruate before her, Pegge invites the ghost into her body

so that she, too, might be married and experience carnal love. She visits her mother's tomb and "beg[s] Ann's melancholy damp to creep into her childish, reluctant womb" (108), thus expressing her desire to feel her mother doubled within her like a fetus.<sup>11</sup> This gothic maternal image is repeated and inverted in a later scene, however, when Pegge attempts to slip into her mother's skin via role-play. As her father lies dying and she washes his body, Pegge's words and actions cast her in the role of the (dead) lover: she answers to her mother's name, massages oils into her father's groin, and the language she uses to describe the scene is pulled from one of her father's famous erotic poems: "I licensed my roving hands and let them go—before, behind, between, above, below" (395).

The cleansing of the paternal body is recounted in two parts—the first narrated from a third-person limited point of view (Pegge's); the second narrated by Pegge herself. This second telling—from which I have just cited—provides the more detailed and erotic account of the incident, and also serves as the novel's dénouement, a structural choice that heightens its thematic importance within the novel. The second account also places some of the responsibility for Pegge's incestuous actions on the mother's ghost: "My mother drove me forward, but oh! I was willing" (396). This incestuous encounter is in fact the sexualization of a role that the daughter has played since her mother's death: "I had taken her part for so long, I hardly knew which was my mother or myself" (393). From that day forward, Pegge "takes the part" of the ghost in all of her sexual relations, a choice symbolized by her refusal to sleep in any bed other than her father's after his death. Pegge seduces both her husband, William, and her childhood love interest, Izaak Walton, in their sleep, caressing each of the men to the point of ejaculation and then returning to her own bedchamber. In the morning, the men are convinced that they have experienced nothing but a dream, a fact that pleases Pegge, for in her mind, "no visitor is so sweet as a night-walker" (390).<sup>12</sup>

Waking, lucid sexual relations in the world of Novik's novel are fraught with difficulty. The parts of the novel that are narrated by Ann Donne's ghost reveal the gendered constraints that are inherent to relationship structures in this representation of seventeenth-century England, constraints which manifest themselves in intimate contexts. These sections—which recount the famously passionate relationship between Ann More and John Donne—depict the stifling physical and intellectual limitations placed on Ann in the name of couple, family, and Church values, and also literalize the Freudian

metaphorical association between tomb and womb. As her husband's desires shift from the carnal to the ecclesiastical, Ann feels increasingly abandoned and imprisoned inside a body that has become a performance space for Protestant ideology. Following Church doctrine, John refuses to visit Ann's bed while she is pregnant, as well as during certain periods of the Church calendar, and thus the couple is only ever reunited long enough to conceive another child. Ann despises this arrangement, as indicated by her bitterness when she describes the context of her twelfth and final pregnancy: "[Y]ou begat another child on me," she cries from the grave, "and I died from it" (113). The grammatical structure of this recrimination leaves no doubt as to who was the agent of the conception and who was the object: John Donne "begets" a child "on" Ann, and this child becomes a sort of weapon in an implicit, gendered murder ("and I died from it").

The ghost-narrator is categorical in her anger as she reflects on her conjugal role: "I was slain for love, at far too young an age" (112). She does not romanticize her marriage to John Donne, and it can therefore be said that when Pegge "takes the part" of the ghost in her relationships, it is a spectre of her own making—she has internalized the stuff of her father's literature. Her father's erotic dreamscape has inked itself onto her conception of her mother, and Pegge is left pregnant with a desire that cannot be fulfilled except in fantasy. Perhaps this is why the last few passages of the novel—which describe Pegge's move from her father's bed into that of her husband William—feel overwritten. I cite here a few sentences from the novel's ultimate paragraph: "Come, William, I see Venus rising like a pink nipple on the plump horizon. Shall we make that clock of yours run faster? Let us bed down together in this new dawn and weave a silken tent of arms" (398). The pun "Shall we make that clock of yours runs faster?" is evidently an allusion to Andrew Marvell's poem "To His Coy Mistress" (and thus to the notion of *carpe diem*), and the "pink nipple" evokes an aroused clitoris. This intentional deployment of allusion and euphemism nonetheless causes the novel to slip away from what Flaubert termed "le mot juste"—understood here as the language that would come closest to the character's palpable, lived experience—precisely because there is no "real" carnal love to refer back to. This is a case of art imitating art: Pegge the character can only love by way of erotic representation, and thus the only language available to Pegge the narrator is overly poeticized. All of Pegge's relationships have been triangulated through her father's poetry; the Oedipal associations in the novel are all too evident.

### Ghostly Conceits

The gendered, spectral elements of Novik's novel converge around the notion of the "conceit." Subjected to the narcissism of the male poet and patriarch, the Donne women are expected to exist only under the sign of erasure. Ann fulfills the function of child-bearer and muse,<sup>13</sup> and while John initially asks Pegge to be his secretary, once he falls ill, he insists that Izaak Walton take her place, and Pegge is shunted towards purely domestic duties that serve as the practical but invisible foundation for her father's self-aggrandizement. While Pegge is busy taking care of her father's physical needs, Izaak Walton writes his biography, and the result—at least from Pegge's viewpoint—is pompous and mythologizing.

The "conceit" of the novel's title evidently refers not only to a personality trait (i.e. male egocentricity), but also to a rhetorical device: it evokes the imaginative playfulness of the language of John Donne's poetry and sermons. As K. K. Ruthven reminds us,

[d]uring the years when conceits of one sort or another were practically the staple of English poetry, the word *conceit* possessed a variety of meanings which made it fruitfully ambiguous in the hands of a poet. At the end of the sixteenth century, it was still being used . . . as a synonym for *thought* . . . ; but it was also applied to such diverse things as a completely unfounded supposition, a witty remark or idea, a clever act of deception, and the products of the artistic imagination. (1)

These terms certainly characterize John Donne's writing as it is highlighted by Novik. However, the polysemy of the novel's title does not stop there, for the reader comes to suspect Pegge of the same kind of "conceit"—in the rhetorical sense of the term—that is better associated with her father. Pegge is not only a narrator, but also an author: she scribbles in her late father's folios and keeps her work locked in a cabinet in her bedchamber, out of reach from her curious and disapproving husband. In the novel's final chapters, the reader comes to the slow realization that Ann Donne's first-person account must in fact have been written by her daughter. The character Samuel Pepys confirms the reader's suspicions when William shows him Pegge's writing, and he responds, "If I am not mistaken, . . . this is written by the woman who became John Donne's wife" (337). Thus Pegge not only emulates the ghost, conjures her and speaks to her, but from an authorial standpoint, she also *is* the ghost. This is the most clever conceit of all: Novik uses Pegge's deception and extraordinary imagination to create a (ghostly) female artistic legacy, one that disrupts and competes with the patriarchal artistic tradition.

The *form* of Pegge's intervention further upsets this tradition, for Pegge's writing is marked by the type of nonlinear, corporeal writing that Hélène Cixous termed *écriture féminine*. "Why d[o] men always begin their stories at the start?" Pegge thinks as she reads Izaak Walton's account of her father's life. Pegge "[c]los[es] the folio" and "sp[ins] it round" before picking up a plume to write (273), and the result is tumultuous: ". . . words quickened within her and the nib skittered across the page, explosive, blurting out syllables, quarter-words, half-words, then galloping phrases that outpaced sense." The tools that Pegge uses are masculine—the text is Walton's, the method her father's (who taught her to scribe), the ink her husband's—but she decides that "[t]omorrow, she w[ill] get up before dawn to mix ink of her own" (274), thus asserting her distinctive authorship. Her creativity in this inaugural writing scene is further punctuated by concrete marks of her femininity: "She felt the blood begin to gather and drip along the inside of her thigh, then the familiar release as the first spots hit her feet" (274). For Pegge, writing represents a secret act of pleasure that flows from the body, during which she "will[s] [her husband] not to come near enough to see the spots, or the book she ha[s] defaced with ink" (274). The product of her efforts is spectral, hidden away as a guard against male interference and judgment. What is more, the correlation between menstruation and writing in this passage evokes Pegge's earlier desire to feel her mother's "melancholy damp" within her. Once again, the ghost of the mother moves through the (artist) daughter and escapes the gendered confines that imprison her; the metaphorical association between ink and blood effects this breach of boundaries.

Pegge has reason to protect her art. William thinks of her writing as "nonsense" (326), a "very inconvenient business" (378), "the inchoate scribblings of a woman" (384), "abandoned, deranged, indecipherable, full of animal cunning" (327). This last description calls to mind the figure of the witch; the connotation is reinforced by the physical and behavioural portrayals of Pegge over the course of the novel. Pegge cuts a wild figure indeed, with her dishevelled looks, disregard for propriety, and predilection for morbid activities, such as fabricating insects from hairs collected from the head of Izaak Walton (304-305, 310-314, 329), handling dead rodents (320), or stealing and transporting her father's effigy (11-18). It is this wilful marginalization that allows Pegge the character—and Novik the author—to move, create, and think more freely within the confines of this fictional seventeenth-century society.<sup>14</sup> As Lori Saint-Martin points out, the depiction of the witch by women authors constitutes a reappropriation of a traumatic, repressed event

in women's history (i.e. the witch hunts)<sup>15</sup> and a symbol of resistance to patriarchal power (167). Novik participates in this tradition by giving Pegge a distinct weirdness, the better to make room for her strange symbolic alchemy.

According to her husband, who cannot decipher her tachygraphy, Pegge “muddl[es] the system by introducing symbols of her own” (351). In this way, she resembles the twins Pam and Pat in *Les fous de Bassan*, who are assigned the task of painting the female ancestors in the reverend Nicolas Jones' family gallery, and who take advantage of their seclusion to represent Olivia and Nora's floating heads all over the walls, as well as that of Nicolas' late wife, Irene (Hébert 16).<sup>16</sup> Just as John Donne introduces a flaw into his own masculine, logocentric system by giving the young Pegge the job of secretary—for this is how she learns to write—the Reverend Jones, as Ancrenat has pointed out, undermines his own patriarchal creation by leaving the paintbrushes in the hands of the twins (“La galerie des ancêtres” 15), and through this choice, I would add, leaves himself vulnerable to the female spectral apparition. Pam and Pat exploit this vulnerability to its fullest, taking a “malicious pleasure” (11) in tearing open the spectral wound of the 1936 murders and stitching it up again with symbols of their own making, symbols which leave gaps large enough for all the female ghosts of the past to walk through. “Over and over, in sparkling letters formed with care, Nora, Olivia, Irene, they dance before my eyes, as I walk through the room” (11), writes Nicolas, observing the scene. He continues:

As for the coal-black garland, patiently worked and unfurled all along the baseboard, if you bend down and look carefully you can distinguish the numbers, always the same ones, joined together in a single endless graffiti: 19361936193619361936193619361936. (11)

Pam and Pat's “graffiti” constitutes not only an act of vengeance, but also an insistent call, one that “bends Nicolas low” and forces him to be attentive to the patriarchal violence that haunts Griffin Creek. This is particularly important from a symbolic standpoint, for Nicolas is Stevens Browns' surrogate—he is, in 1982, the last bastion of misogyny in Griffin Creek.

Pam and Pat's trickery, imagination, and malevolence create a space for Olivia's halting, nostalgic intervention later in the novel. Because past wrongs have been inscribed on the walls of history and acknowledged, Olivia can forgo vengeance and concentrate on the lost relationship with the other, which, in the end, remains evasive. “In vain do I whistle at keyholes, slip under beds stripped of blankets and mattresses, blow fine dust, . . . the one I am seeking is no longer here” (150). The scattered traces of the lost

relationship with the other are most visible in the gaps in Olivia's discourse. "I who never finish a sentence" (150), she observes, self-aware, and in all those unfinished or broken sentences lie infinite possibility and infinite loss. Thus, when Olivia thinks, "Someone has *certainly* . . . Cast me still alive into the calm lunar depths of that deep bay, between Cap Sec and Cap Sauvagine" (154, emphasis mine), there is nothing "certain" about her statement, for in the ellipses between the two halves of the sentence lies a denial of history as it has already unfolded and the hope that aggression is not the only possible outcome when it comes to heterosexual relations. The reader can imagine many loving, alternative conclusions to the lead-in clause ("Someone has certainly. . ."), lapping like waves across Olivia's mind before the hard reality of the murder breaks through and snaps language and meaning in half. Indeed, whereas Novik's Pegge is at her most vibrant when engaging with language, Hébert's Olivia feels shut off from it, given to symbolic stasis: ". . . am I not absent from my name, from my flesh and bones, limpid as a tear upon the sea?" (158) she asks herself. For Olivia, language is an empty shell, and no matter how loudly her ancestors cry out to her, she will never be able to speak back, because the words available to her are devoid of love and therefore of meaning: "Only love could turn me into a full-fledged woman, communicating as an equal with my mother and grandmothers in the shadow of the wind, using veiled terms, a knowing air, telling of the mystery that ravages me body and soul" (160).

### Conclusion

Anne Hébert's Olivia de la Haute Mer and Mary Novik's Pegge both *haunt* and *are haunted*, and in each instance the revenant signals an amorous *lack*: she always appears within the distorted space of the couple, and at the moment where the daughter gropes towards that which she most desires. In Hébert's novel, the revenant points to Olivia's longing to relive a loving connection with Stevens. Olivia's plaintive narrative grows out of a rupture in the patriarchal discourse that dominates Griffin Creek; the twinned survivors Pam and Pat facilitate this breach. As for the voices of the female ancestors, they mark a sort of double denial on Olivia's part: a denial of violence against women, and also of the necessity to protect oneself against that very violence at the cost of the relationship with the other. The voices also constitute the pseudo-return of what must remain hidden: if Olivia is to continue to seek out what Kristeva terms an "open system," heterogeneous love, she must also ignore her ancestors' warnings.

Whereas Hébert's Olivia is ambivalent to her ancestors' intervention, Novik's Pegge conjures and incarnates her late mother through her interactions and her writing. This spectral version of Ann Donne, imagined by Pegge, expresses anger and regret at never having experienced heterogeneous love, even as Pegge herself, in her "real" relationships with men, role-plays at a different kind of passion, a simulacrum of the love described in her father's poetry. Pegge's situation is highly ironic, for her exclusion from the creative and intellectual world—she can only write her mother's story secretly, in the margins of her father's texts—is correlative to the romanticized heteronormative love that she so desperately seeks. Indeed, female passivity—rather than creativity—is inherent to romantic discourse: the female object of desire cannot be a writer, only a silent muse. Pegge overcomes this constraint by projecting her creativity onto her mother, who can no longer occupy the position of object of desire because she is a ghost (nor would she wish to take on this role again). Pegge's projection creates a ghostly juxtaposition that throws into relief her own problematic conception of relationships.

Thus in both *Les fous de Bassan* and *Conceit*, the revenant tracks the female character's compulsive movement towards a loving encounter with the other and the various ways in which this quest ends in failure due to patriarchal violence (as in the case of Olivia and Ann Donne), or the internalization on the part of the female character of romantic representations of love and courtship (as in the case of Pegge). Love in both novels is turned inside out, and from its underbelly, the revenant emerges to trace a common wound and lend her uncanny voice to a gendered silence.

#### NOTES

- 1 This article draws on the theories that I put forth in my dissertation, entitled "La *revenance* dans le roman québécois au féminin après 1980."
- 2 The recounting of the village idiot, Perceval, is interrupted from time to time by an omniscient voice, a sort of village chorus.
- 3 Unless otherwise noted, throughout this article I quote Sheila Fischman's English translation of *Les fous de Bassan*, entitled *In the Shadow of the Wind*.
- 4 Stevens writes: "At times I'd swear the Atkins girls are here. Came in who knows how. . . . All this time they've been chasing me. . . . And yet I threw them in the sea, on the night of August 31, 1936" (176).
- 5 The novel received a starred review in the literary trade magazine *Quill & Quire*, won the Ethel Wilson prize, and was long-listed for the Giller prize.
- 6 Some of this analysis of *Les fous de Bassan* dovetails with the observations made in my article "Invasion, fuite et faille subjectives: La figure de la revenante dans *Les fous de Bassan* d'Anne Hébert", which appeared in *Les Cahiers Anne Hébert* 11.

- 7 While Stevens does not express affection or admiration for women as an adult, he does so with regard to a male friend he knew in Florida, Old Mic: “And that’s where I met you, old buddy, . . . You were always laughing and your face was all creased from laughing, and on those rare occasions when your face was still for a moment, there were little white lines all over your sun-tanned cheeks, especially around the eyes. Your laughter had woven a web of pearly scars, protected from the sun” (42).
- 8 Katri Suhonen also examines the heterosexual relationship in *Les fous de Bassan* as it relates to patriarchal violence. In Griffin Creek, male and female characters alike receive what Suhonen terms a “patriarchal education” (“une education patriarcale”) (70). Built into this education is a dynamic of male aggression and female retreat (Suhonen 70-77). Evelyne Letendre, constructing her own argument regarding Stevens Brown’s predatory behaviour around Suhonen’s premise of learned violence, reads Stevens’ perverse actions as the result of the disastrous gender binary that is upheld by the men and women of Griffin Creek. According to Letendre, “Anne Hébert élabore un personnage qui *devient* prédateur parce qu’il souffre trop de ne pas pouvoir exprimer des pulsions identifiées comme féminines” (68).
- 9 Olivia is not the only character in the novel to repress a traumatic past. Scott Lyngaas has observed that “there is no escape from [the] communal trauma” that the murder of 1936 represents for the inhabitants of Griffin Creek (107), and that the characters of the novel repeat and express this trauma in similar ways, as though their voices spoke to the discomfort of a single psyche (104-105).
- 10 Translation mine. Original French: “Qui désormais veille sur moi, m’espionne plutôt et me tracasse sans cesse?” (Hébert, *Les fous de Bassan* 210).
- 11 Marlene Goldman in her study *Dispossession: Haunting in Canadian Fiction*, which deals with texts written by several English Canadian authors, argues “that women’s ghost stories are . . . written in response to the long-standing psychological associations between femininity and the uncanny—associations that date back to classical conceptions of hysteria, a disorder supposedly caused by a pathological ‘wandering uterus.’ Since patriarchal contests of power based on lineage and inheritance are fought on the grounds of women’s bodies—the womb being the site of legitimate and illegitimate modes of social reproduction—it is useful to appreciate how contests over property and propriety relate to hysteria, a disorder whose name refers to the Greek term for uterus” (19). Pegge’s fantasies, which conflate her dead mother’s womb and her own, therefore situate Novik’s novel within a longstanding gendered trope, one that points to women’s “dispossession” in private, political, and socioeconomic realms.
- 12 The wordplay in this passage—the primary definition of the term “night-walker” is of course “prostitute”—further points to Pegge’s desire to slip in and out of various feminine roles, particularly those that are forbidden.
- 13 Much has been written about the muse, the erasure of the feminine, and male creativity. See for example Elisabeth Bronfen, Mary DeShazer, and Nancy Huston.
- 14 It would be interesting to contrast the way in which the characters in Hébert’s and Novik’s novels move through time and space. In this regard, Philip Stratford’s observations regarding Canadian novels in French and English are relevant. Stratford notes that “[t]he sense of time is . . . disrupted in the Québec novel” (99), and “the sense of space is . . . restrictive” (99), whereas the English Canadian novel is characterized by an “[e]volution in time” and a “mobility in space” (101). Indeed, the action in *Les fous de Bassan* is limited primarily to the village of Griffin Creek, where time is short-circuited by the 1936 trauma,

and the characters are trapped inside a dream-like, haunted mnemonic space. Novik's novel, on the other hand, has a strong temporal thrust and is varied in its settings; the only immobile character in *Conceit* is the female revenant herself, who feels stifled and angry as the world bustles atop her grave.

15 For a sociological discussion of the legacy of the witch hunts, see Silvia Federici.

16 Irene commits suicide not long before the murders.

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