

Anne Hébert 1916–2000

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The death, earlier this year, of Anne Hébert became an occasion of not only paying lavish tribute to her work, but also assessing the enduring significance (or not) of a writer preoccupied with “a world before feminism,” as David Homel put it in the *Montreal Gazette*. Writing in the *Globe and Mail*, Ray Conlogue and Tu Thanh Ha pointed out that, by the age of thirty-eight, Hébert “had declared she would not marry or have children, a monastic vow often made by serious women writers of the time and she never wavered from it.” Hébert’s celibacy and childlessness (both mentioned in virtually every obituary), together with her failure to produce the creative equivalent, namely “followers” or a “school,” motivated eulogizers to inquire somewhat nervously of contemporary women writers what influence, if any, Hébert’s work had on theirs. Monique Proulx (b. 1952) obliged by assuring her interviewers that “the very fact [Hébert] did things no woman had done before set an example for younger women writers.” However, she failed to point out what these things were and mused about a possible shortcoming when she asserted that “[Hébert] created torn characters with dreadful passions, but she [i.e. Proulx] had no way of knowing if that was her case personally.”

The latter presumably meant that Hébert kept her own passions, dreadful or not, to herself and required privacy to an extent that limited her usefulness as a role-model for burgeoning feminists. Proulx’s gentle reproach has an amusing counterpart in a 1999 review of *Am I Disturbing You?* (nominated for a Giller Prize at the time) which was not restrained by the occasion of Hébert’s death and thus vociferously proclaimed its objections to “the

poetic soul-searching, the melodramatic obsessions, the grandiose emotions” in Hébert’s books. Together with the “lyrical meditations” of *The English Patient* and *Fugitive Pieces*, *Am I Disturbing You?* is declared a dated throwback to the “societal self-absorption that went out with the 1980s [sic].”

One can only hope that, in positing this neat historical *découpage*, the reviewer practises the irony that she misses in Hébert’s “self-indulgent” work. But innocent as her remarks are of any knowledge of Canadian literary history, they are worth looking at a little more closely because they echo aspects of Hébert’s reputation among nationalist critics, both the sovereigntist and the federalist kind, some thirty years earlier. Although they were little concerned with the question of women writers and the role-models they provided, the authors of *parti-pris* were sharply critical of Hébert’s introspective work which they paired with her cousin Saint-Denys-Garneau’s writing as insufferably morbid and therefore unsupportive of the separatist cause. Alluding to Hébert’s collection of poetry, *Le Tombeau des rois* (1953), Laurent Girouard sneered that “[l]es écrivains de l’époque Saint-Denys-Garneau à Anne Hébert ont fui dans leurs os jusqu’aux tombeaux qu’ils voulaient royaux.” Interestingly, however, Saint-Denys-Garneau, together with Paul-Emile Borduas, reaps the lion’s share of venom for failing to meet *parti-pris* standards of “social relevance.” In keeping with the misogyny displayed elsewhere in *parti-pris*, it may well be that Hébert was not considered weighty enough to be given as much attention, even if it was attention by way of attack.

Anglo-Canadian nationalist critics, by contrast, found this very introspection fascinating and highly useful in constructing their image of the Québécois “Other.” While *parti-pris* dismissed Saint-Denys-Garneau for submerging himself in the morass of “la ‘vie intérieure,’” Anansi’s *Manual for Draft-Age Immigrants to Canada* (1968) included only one work from Québec in a brief booklist for “Further Reading” submitted by Dave Godfrey, namely Saint-Denys-Garneau’s *Journal*. To Anglo-Canadians, Québec in general and Montreal in particular substituted for sixties France. In this “vibrant and vital city,” the *Manual* says, “the radical students at Université de Montréal” co-exist with the “solid and English” clientele at McGill, lending the city “a verve and panache lacking elsewhere.” On the cover of the McClelland and Stewart edition of the Saint-Denys-Garneau journals, the poet appears as the quintessential French intellectual in a beret. He also resembles a young Fidel Castro, as a bemused reviewer in *Canadian Literature* pointed out, and thus doubled as a romantic version of

Anglo-Canadian press coverage of the Cuban pavilion at Expo '67 where ideological issues are also habitually "sublimated" into issues of fashion, gastronomy, and interior decorating). Anne Hébert lacked the tragic aura that surrounded her cousin after his premature death and she was not given to the kind of histrionics that would have compensated for this shortcoming. However, Anglophone critics seized with alacrity on her funereal imagery, (invariably described as "opulent" in her obituaries) as fashionable expression of Latin melancholia that can be easily absorbed into a metaphor of "the Canadian situation." Writing in *Survival*, Atwood makes this equation quite bluntly, asserting that Hébert's obsession with death "is also an image of ultimate sterility and powerlessness, the final result of being a victim." Two years after the October crisis, Atwood's conflation of the "Québec situation" with the "Canadian situation" is remarkable, as is her failure to define either one of these contextually, but her approach is not atypical. The *University of Toronto Quarterly*, in reviewing *Le Tombeau des rois*, enumerates the "cosmic symbols" that inform Hébert's poems, "the seasons, weather, night, water, desert, black islands," before drawing quasi-mathematical equations between certain symbols and their "meaning": "Spacious desert translates a feeling of vast emptiness, boredom, fertility, 'sand' is dryness, sterility, spiritual death. Parts of the body are used to express her suffering; 'heart' is inner pain; 'dead hands' are signs that movement has departed; massive rings on the fingers are signs of bondage to the ethical world."

This is one review which avoids the words "opulent" or "luscious" in describing Hébert's poetry, calling its art "anatomical," "austere," "the art of dry bones" instead. The brittleness of her metaphors is reflected in the few biographical data publicized after her death which depicted her as growing up in the isolation of sick rooms, "with bouts of scarlet fever, pleurisy and appendicitis." However, as so often in the public assessment of Hébert's work, the contradictions mirror the ambivalences of both her writing and her persona. Repeatedly, reviewers captured the paradoxical combination of passion and death in her work in the image of the gem-stone, hard as bone and bright as fire. Sheila Fischman, translator of many of Hébert's works, eulogized her ability to use "words like jewels, like gemstones, that were sharp, clear and fine." By contrast, the reviewer of *Am I Disturbing You?* cited above damned the book with qualified praise by calling it "a tiny gem," a judgement not unlike Virginia Woolf's infamous quip about Jane Austen's novels.

Anne Hébert described her own work as "playing with fire." In my first graduate course on Canadian fiction, I thought I would die if I had to read

another novel about some tight-lipped pastor or farmer staring at a barren field. Then I read *Kamouraska* and things began to look much, much better. When Anne Hébert died, I re-read the book. No, it is not feminist. This time around, Elisabeth d'Aulnières's self-hatred and her contempt toward other women were painful to read about in ways that did not fully come home to me when I first became intrigued with the relentless irony of her voice. But the book remains an elegant, passionate and unsparing account of human frailty, and it is as vivid an evocation of the place and period it describes as is likely to come our way.

