

FRAMED VOICES

The Polyphonic Elegies of Hébert and Kogawa

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CANADIAN WRITING IN THE 1980's — by Ondaatje, Munro, Bowering, Findley — seems to be characterized by an elegiac tone and structure and a genealogical compulsion, which sets up not only “the writer as elegist,” but the “reader as family historian.” Books by Anne Hébert and Joy Kogawa, *Les fous de Bassan* and *Obasan*, while forming part of this larger group, resemble each other thematically and structurally in even more specific ways.

The phonetic similarity of their titles, *Obasan* and *Les fous de Bassan*, is an agreeable coincidence which only a deconstructionist could love; more significantly, both were published by women Canadians within a year of each other at the beginning of the 1980's (1981-1982)¹; the key events of Hébert's novel occur in 1936, the very year in which the heroine-narrator of Kogawa's novel was born, and the stories continue up to 1972 and 1982 respectively; yet it is the many framed voices of their elegiac telling that bring them most significantly together.

Two minority Christian communities, mythicizing themselves in biblical terms,² two chosen peoples being wiped from the earth by, in *Les fous de Bassan*, their collective and individual guilt, by, in *Obasan*, their collective and individual suffering: these communities are, in a sense, the central characters of these novels. Biblical allusions in each book, especially to the Books of the Prophets, speak of loss, guilt, suffering, redemption, or the punishments of the Apocalypse. Exile, dispersal of families, bereavement, breaking of communal links, are recorded in both books by survivors, who are themselves at a dead end of barrenness and able to foresee only, and quite soon, the entire extinction of these chosen peoples. Miscegenation is the unspoken danger for one of these extended families, while incest is the all-but-explicit terror of the other. Both books start and end — are framed — with cemeteries, church services, “pierres tombales,” specific deaths. These books are both individual and communal elegies.

In *Obasan*, of the two families (Nakane and Kato) whose genealogy and close interweaving make their extended family into a synecdoche for the Japanese-Canadian community, we are repeatedly reminded that none of the three main characters, Naomi (the narrator), or her two aunts, Emily and Obasan, will bear

children. Only Naomi's brother, Stephen, who has long since opted out of the community, might still carry on the heritage: yet he may not even be *Canadian* any longer, but cosmopolitan (he is last seen keeping company with a French divorcée); at best his heirs will be Canadian — without a hyphen. A sombre parable for the Canadian mosaic.

In Hébert, the survivor who opens the book with his framing "livre" in present time (1982), the pastor Nicolas Jones, must, paradoxically, move backward to find his progeny,³ back to the very beginning of the community, two centuries earlier, in 1782; he must become, by a reversal of generation, the begetter of his own ancestors:

Moi qui n'ai pas eu de fils j'engendre mes pères jusqu'à la dixième génération. Moi qui suis sans descendance j'ai plaisir à remettre au monde mes ascendants jusqu'à la face première originelle de Henry Jones, né à Montpelier, Vermont. (15)

He "frames" Hébert's book with the many little, literal, frames he places around his ancestors, who are caricatured in his strange self-painted gallery, somewhat as Naomi's genealogical reflections are set off by the framed family photographs from the time of her early childhood in the coastal paradise of Vancouver, from the time before her mother's leaving ends her personal paradise, before the persecution and expulsion of the Japanese community in 1941 ends their communal paradise.

As in that time of childhoods remembered in Hébert's book — all that apparently halcyon yet menacing experience which precedes the fatal summer of 1936 — early paradise is followed by collective dispersal or death for most of the characters: "we disappear into the future" (O. 112); "résidu d'une tribu en voie de disparition" (FB 15), but by a kind of emotional paralysis or living death for the frame narrator. Kogawa's Naomi resembles Hébert's two survivors of that early time, Nicolas, "living in the frame" for forty-six years, caught in his pattern of old habits, waiting to die, and Stevens Brown who, like Naomi, exiled from the coast, is like Nicolas, living only to complete his confession, his last letter, the framing narrative which concludes the book, at which point he will kill himself. Only these doubtfully redemptive frames remain, in Hébert, as fractured elegies for the time before the fall, ambiguous confessions of guilt and complicity and markers for the forty-six-year-long borderline that stretches out between Fall and Extinction. Naomi, likewise (indeed more explicitly), writes an elegy for the dead and the almost-dead of her fractured community. She, too, has been "living in the frame" of three decades of non-life, of emotional sterility and non-stop grief. She is "tired of living between deaths and funerals, weighted with decorum" (183), with endless absence, like "snow . . . burying me beneath a growing monochromatic weight" (200). But she is perhaps more hopeful of the healing powers of art than Hébert's narrators are: it seems that her elegy (the novel) may at

last free her for a life of her own, by means of this adequate memorial, this speaking history of her lost community. Her emotional stunting has been a negative, unflowering silence, "the silence that cannot speak" (Prologue); restored to speech, and perhaps also to feeling, by the slow findings-out which constitute the chief patterns given to the events of the novel, she makes her book self-reflexively out of her account of its own making, out of the dialectic between the noise, the facts, the history, the political polemics of Aunt Emily, the hyphenated Canadian, and the silence, the feeling, the sheltering, the unspeaking lyricism ("the silence that will not speak," as it turns out) of Obasan, Japanese still, to the very end, and although in Canada, not yet Canadian. This book, once made, can at last redeem, perhaps, the time of suffering.

In Hébert, we are told at once that the community founded by the Loyalists in 1782 is being taken over — both the land *and* its history⁴ — by the Papists, the Francophone majority in Quebec. Conversely, in Kogawa, it is the Anglophone majority which brutally expropriates the Japanese-Canadian community of British Columbia. Aunt Emily quotes the Prophet Habbakuk, "Write the vision and make it plain. Habbakuk 2:2" (31), in an exhortation to Naomi, not at that point understood by either her or the reader. But if we seek the context of the passage we find, among other relevant things, that "the wicked doth compass about the righteous . . . to possess the dwelling places that are not theirs" (Hab. 1:4, 6).

Kogawa's extended opening frame is made up of eighty pages in which Naomi's shifting lyric voice interweaves past and present to narrate the loss of early paradise from the perspective of her remembered childhood. In present time (1972), she wrestles, both within and outside herself, with the voices of Emily and Obasan, her two aunts. Although she puts up considerable inner resistance to the demands of the Emily voice, continually undermining with nervous humour its patent resemblance to a large part of herself, it is the apparently more congenial voice of Obasan which in fact puts off her questions, makes no acknowledgement of her need for answers, and tells her nothing. Neither Obasan nor Emily at this stage i.e., September 1972, when Obasan's husband, Naomi's Uncle Isamu, dies, and Naomi, now in her middle thirties, starts to write this novel) can give any workable answer to Naomi's psychic entrapment in her perpetually thwarted search for her lost mother: "we're trapped . . . by our memories of the dead — all our dead — those who refuse to bury themselves" (26). But both of these seemingly incompatible voices are essential to her eventual synthesis of her self, which is also her novel. Naomi is "living in the frame" until the novel releases her; in political terms, she is living in the hyphen of non-identity, until the recovered knowledge of her mother can make possible some accepting synthesis of her two origins, Japanese *and* (hyphen) Canadian (the key oxymoron of this fundamentally

oxymoronic book); at the end of her narrative she puts on "Aunt Emily's coat" (246) to return to the coulee where she had last seen Uncle Isamu (1-4).

But that synthesis is only achieved in the other framing section, also in present time, which concludes the book. In the second narrative section of the book (80-110), the voice of Emily, in letters and diaries from the war (closely modelled on actual archival materials⁵), gives a chronological historical account of the facts and feelings of persecution and exile, of which Naomi had only her partial child's view. These letters, written for Naomi's mother but never sent — a narrative strategy with analogies in Hébert — are first read by Naomi herself, thirty years later. Thus, obliquely, these letters reach their true recipient. The middle and longest section of the book (110-210) is Naomi's extended chronological narrative of the family's first exile in the B.C. interior, which is, for all its hardship, another version of childhood pastoral. The essential patterns of exile are established by key symbolic episodes, connected by lyric bridges (often painful and complex dreams) which remind us of Naomi's ceaseless though largely subliminal search for reunion with her lost mother. Then follows the emotionally concentrated, deliberately abridged account of the second exile, the "exile from our place of exile" (197), the physical and psychological horrors of Alberta, a time of sufferings which complete the destruction of the family.

The last forty pages, the concluding frame, unfold the revelation of the loss-and-gain implicit in the opening frame section, in a way that reshapes into full significance the narrative content of the first three sections: Naomi's Vancouver childhood, Emily's own version of that time, and Naomi's exile years. Shortly thereafter she at last hears the letters about her mother which fill the gap in her heart, answer the haunting question "What happened to my mother?" and solve, as far as possible, the mystery which the reader, following Naomi in her reluctant interpretation, has also been trying to work out. A second document, only understandable in terms of Emily's whole package, has thus by multiple oblique indirection also finally reached its true recipient. Naomi's subjective experience can at last be understood in terms of Emily's wider, more "factual" political and historical context, as Naomi in the end undermines her own uneasy irony about Emily's exhortation to her to seek the "vision" predicted by Habbakuk. Emily, cryptically, had quoted only "Write the vision and make it plain," but the biblical verses continue:

For the vision is yet for an appointed time, but at the end it shall speak. . . . *For the stone shall cry out of the wall.* (Hab. 2:2, 3, 11; italics mine)

Naomi does indeed, in the novel, achieve such a vision, on behalf of Emily and all the others. But without Emily's package of documentary information, including the key letters in Japanese (which language, significantly, Naomi is unable to read), this elegy for the lost, barren community, this history of the

chosen, suffering people, could not have yielded Naomi's visionary novel of the recovered self. Its slim outer frame deliberately concentrates the separate effects of the two main "voices," the Emily-voice and the Obasan-voice. The single (unnumbered) page of the opening prologue is a complex prose lyric from which emerge most of the image patterns of the book:

Beneath the grass the speaking dreams and beneath the dreams is a sensate sea. The speech that frees comes forth from that amniotic deep. To attend its voice, I can hear it say, is to embrace its absence. But I fail the task. The word is stone. . . . Unless the stone bursts with telling, unless the seed flowers with speech, there is in my life no living word. . . .

This hymn to stones, to silence, and to the freezing of poetic speech contrasts starkly with the prosaic eloquence of the document which Emily has been thrusting upon an unwilling Naomi at intervals through the book (Memorandum . . . to the House and Senate of Canada, April 1946), which constitutes the last three pages of the book, and makes up the corresponding outermost frame, in these bare and historical words of protest:

. . . now that hostilities have ceased for some time, it cannot possibly be suggested that the safety of Canada requires the injustice of treating Canadian citizens in the manner proposed. . . . (249)

The very last voice heard is thus an Emily-voice, a citational, documentary one, as the first voice, the lyric prologue, is Naomi's *giving* of a voice to the silence of Obasan.

THESE NOVELS BOTH FOCUS on relatively small and anomalous corners of the Canadian mosaic: one the Japanese-Canadians, in a sea of appropriative Anglophones, the other an Anglophone Protestant community in a Francophone Catholic sea. Their collective historical life is seen in the apocalyptic perspective of an explicitly theological image of the end of the world in Hébert, while Kogawa images a secular apocalypse, in the form in which, inevitably, we all imagine it in our time, the dropping of the atomic bomb. Yet that fieriest of all furnaces is carefully anticipated by allusions to the biblical fiery furnace with its angel protecting the believers, and to the smaller funeral pyre lit in the mountains for their Buddhist grandmother (131).

Although both books are strongly structured by biblical patterns, images, and citations, Christianity itself provides only ambiguous answers in either. To be sure, its rituals and services provide an unironic basis for community in Kogawa, a consolation for victims, a binding together of his people by the good shepherd, Nakayama-sensei, through his arduous journeys — on foot, by bicycle, finally by jalopy — to bring messages of love and unity to his scattered flock.

But if Christianity is the one major force of social cohesion left to them, it is also, in its great commandment to “turn the other cheek,” a pattern for victimization. It is ironic that the Japanese-Canadians are more truly Christian in their behaviour than the Canadians: it is with real bitterness that Emily notes the charity with which the exiles donated money to the victims of floods in British Columbia, floods on those very lands which had been taken from them without recompense (188). The other cheek has been turned with (or rather without) a vengeance, and what might come to be seen as a moral triumph Emily senses only as an ultimate self-victimization. Yet Christianity binds together on levels other than the political or social: it binds together *the book*, rather as the “long thread knotted to Obasan’s twine,” by making up part of a Japanese ideogram for love (228), also binds up that package of documents which will in the end generate Naomi’s book of revelation. They “are piled as neatly as the thin white wafers in Sensei’s silver box” (182), for communication *is* communion; they are “white paper bread,” like the biblically oxymoronic “stone bread” by which Isamu showed a love as true as the bread was, paradoxically, inedible. For before the poem-prologue there is an epigraph, which, in context (Rev. 2: 10, 17), prophetically supplies an answer to the cry of cold silence from the Prologue: “I will give him . . . in the stone / A new name written” is a message from St. John to the Churches to “fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer . . . prison . . . [nor] tribulation.” Is this citational voice Naomi’s or Kogawa’s? In any case, Christianity “binds” the book explicitly in this epigraph as well as implicitly, in the mere justice (yet a justice, in that historical context, which it took charity to demand) demanded in the epilogue. Within these frames, the rhetoric and imagery of Christianity bind together the text rather as Nakayama-sensei binds together his flock, particularly when we note that it is he, functioning both in meta-text and story, who persuades the elders that the time has come to tell the now-grown children of their mother’s fate, and whose mediating “voice” transmits the “voice” of Naomi’s mother in the final, crucial revelation of his reading out loud the letters (233); those letters, we remember, that Naomi could not read for herself, which have thus been a present absence throughout most of the book as we read it.⁶ It is a very “Japanese” literary touch, perhaps an undeliberate one on Kogawa’s part, to make documents so obliquely received so crucial to eventual awareness.

But Nicolas Jones, Hébert’s shepherd over an equally aging and dispersed flock, is far more ironically observed than Nakayama-sensei is. “*Honore tes père et mère*” (54; italics Hébert’s) he says, to his aging and entirely orphaned congregation, in a public expression of his own private reversing of generations; his congregation is, collectively, as barren as he is himself. The double sex-murder which is the main plot-element of the book suggests an absolute and general guilt, ample grounds for an apocalyptic punishment, as powerfully as the atomic bomb

can suggest an absolute and general suffering. (Kogawa does not emphasize, but most of Kogawa's readers are likely to remember, that the bomb was dropped by "us.")

Of course "guilt" and "suffering" are by no means mutually exclusive concepts: there are victims in Hébert (almost always women),⁷ while a sense of guilt, of complicity in their own oppression, suffuses the entire Japanese community. Although the Japanese are destroyed from the outside, by relatively impersonal (or at least, within the book, depersonalized) forces, their sense of being punished for some (objectively non-existent) guilt is one of the major inner obstacles to their recovery of a sense of self-worth. Naomi's experience of child abuse (at the hands, so to speak, of a white male serpent in the Vancouver Eden) is an encapsulated example of a guilt which is a *part* of suffering. Her sense of complicity with her abuser separates her from her mother even before the latter's departure, and this is one of the cruelest effects of the abuse itself. The males of this community are, in turn, feminized, deprived of the power to defend their families or to make choices for them: there is, in exile, a certain equality between the sexes — an equality of victimization, at any rate. If Hébert's is an explicit feminism of the psychology of male domination and sexual power politics, Kogawa's is largely an oblique feminism of marginality, of a silence finding a voice.

THE FRAMING VOICES IN THESE TWO BOOKS are those of these three compulsive narrators, Kogawa's Naomi and Hébert's Nicolas Jones and Stevens Brown; the framed voices in these highly polyphonic texts are voices of intertextuality, especially in Hébert, voices of divided selves, voices of dialectical principles embodied in actual characters. But they are chiefly voices of memory (or remembered voices) tortuously recollected, chewed over, re-experienced ("Everything we have ever done we do again and again in my mind" [O. 68]), as the narrators — Kogawa's paralyzed by loss and suffering, Hébert's paralyzed by guilt — stop developing morally or emotionally, stop relating to other people (if they ever did), stop *living*, in short, in order to live in the past, among the living dead:

Dernier jour du monde peut-être. Et si on vivait depuis ce temps-là, nous tous de Griffin Creek, assommés comme des vieux chevaux, sans savoir qu'on est morts? (FB 162; "stunned, like old horses, not knowing we're dead?" H. 119)

They are living, not *in* the picture, but on its edge, in its frame.

"Il fallait oublier pour vivre" (FB 52): neither Nicolas nor Stevens can forget, so neither can live. They are delivered over to the judgments of their projected selves (like some of the victim-selves in Naomi's dreams, or the two parts of her "self" as seen in Emily and Obasan). In Nicolas Jones' case these

are his self-begotten ancestors, who “watch” from the walls without seeing, and the childlike old spinster twins, Nicolas’s principal but quite impervious audience (like the listeners to his sermons), who “listen” without hearing. In their excess of doubling they pathetically replace the twinlike cousins who are endlessly being remembered. Likewise Stevens writes to Mic, his American “brother” (Hébert uses the English word, which becomes in the translation, for no good reason, “buddy”), who is unlikely ever to receive the letters, indeed who may already be dead himself, or to whom, like Naomi’s mother, the non-receiving recipient of Aunt Emily’s letters, they may never even be sent. This American “brother” stands in for the other true affection of Stevens’ unloving life, his idiot brother Percival, who is, of course (like the twins), also incapable of understanding. Nicolas sees Percival, the idiot, as an angel announcing apocalypse; Stevens ironically hopes that Percival, the one innocent being in the story, will love him and welcome him to heaven as if he too were innocent. The idiot stands for Stevens’ hope of an uncritical forgiveness, and for Nicolas’s fear of apocalyptic judgment. All these non-comprehending characters are in a sense implied readers, whose imperviousness only adds to the narrators’ compulsiveness: to *make* them listen; to *make* us read. Similarly Naomi’s grandmother writes, apologetically, to “extricate herself from the grip of the past” (236); her writing the letter is thus an inner duplication of Naomi’s writing the book, while Naomi herself perhaps achieves the acknowledgement and forgiveness only ironically hypothesized of Percival.

Nicolas’s will to evil, his lustful desire, are morally equivalent to Stevens’ fully enacted sexual violence. Nicolas circles around his guilt, evasively but obsessively, while Stevens manifests a Byronic egotism in his attempts at self-justification, but for both of them Percival is (like Faulkner’s Benjy, on whom he is almost too evidently modelled⁸) a visible conscience. As narrators they could both say, as Stevens actually does, “les mots . . . me délivrent de ma mémoire” (FB 233), i.e., writing frees one *from* memory, but only, it turns out, *to* death. Stevens will (Nicolas will too) die when his memory is emptied out onto the page; their lives are co-equal to their memories. Although Nicolas’s text is explicitly his “livre,” he seems to be ruminating rather than writing; Stevens, on the other hand, reminds us continually that he is *writing* this account of himself for Mic,⁹ that “reader in the text” who stands for us and who *must* (like us) read to the very end. Stevens’ last words are a quasi-documentary postscript telling why he was not convicted of the murders: his involuntary, forced confession was ruled inadmissible. We must read to the very end, that is, in response to Stevens’ need to reveal that he was released from the bar of justice to the bar of his own self-judgment, which has now, forty-six years later, at last convicted him.

Nicolas and Stevens, one at each end of the synchronous frames (autumn 1982) of the present-time narration, are thus linked to each other by innumerable

internal echoes: Stevens thinks, for instance, of painting and graffiti (albeit “invisible,” thus metaphorical, ones [233]) at perhaps the same moment that Nicolas does. Thus their narratives are linked across the body of the framed texts of the past: two confessions of guilt framing the central, absent mystery. These narrators are always on the edge of some absolute impassable to consciousness (“Après moi le gouffre abrupte. Le vide.” [20]), the last day of self or world, or in some state *between* definable states, with “aucun présent ni avenir” (235), purgatorial heroes without hope of redemption.¹⁰

HÉBERT AND KOGAWA are both well known as lyric poets, novel, Grandmother Kato’s letters, and various other inserted documents. Both as well as novelists, and much of the tightly packed, interwoven image patterning of their novels reinforces and indeed weaves the texture of their “framed voices.” It is more obvious in Hébert, whose multiple narrative voices are disjunct in a way that forces the reader to attempt to join them, but Kogawa, too, juxtaposes voices in a kind of dialogism: substantial portions of text consist of Emily’s journal authors use epigraphs, indeed Hébert uses half a dozen: St. Matthew, Jean-Pierre Jouve, Hélène Cixous, Shakespeare (those lines from *Macbeth* which of course suggest the Faulkner text to which she is so clearly indebted, *The Sound and the Fury*), Hans Christian Andersen (from “La petite Sirène,” which is echoed throughout the “Olivia” section), and finally, and rather inscrutably, Rimbaud (“Parade,” *Illuminations* 4:29); I have not been able to locate the quotations from Jouve and Cixous. Both authors use two languages; Hébert has noted¹¹ her desire to make *Les fous de Bassan* seem like a translation from the English by, among other things, employing English words embedded in her French text; Kogawa uses a great deal of Japanese, likewise, for exoticism, to emphasize differences, for lyric effect, and indeed for realistic effect, as in the speech of Obasan herself, or Isamu, whose Japanese is routinely translated for us by Naomi, or in the macaronic church services in which Japanese and English are employed alternately. Another “language” thematically significant in *Obasan* is of course music; it permits Stephen’s slippage from his national (i.e., linguistic) identity, which he rejects in so many ways from the very beginning, into cosmopolitanism, yet it binds Stephen to his father as the language of silence binds Naomi to her mother. Among many silences, there is also the silence of Japanese words and culture to an ear — Naomi’s — which cannot entirely hear them. All three of the frame narrators internalize silences and voices from the past, words and cries, the voice (or the Word) of the preacher, and of course the extended echoes of the Bible, all of which they share, although Hébert would otherwise seem to be far more caught up in the intertextual “voices” of other authors (Gide, Camus,

Baudelaire, Robbe-Grillet, to mention a few of the more obvious ones, in addition, of course, to those pointed to in the epigraphs, and the omnipresent Faulkner) than Kogawa is. As the abridged reference to Habbakuk serves as the kernel of Kogawa's meta-text, so the buried reference to the Book of the minor prophet Malachi expands into a key account of Nicolas's motives for tramping his own endless round of self-justification. Is it significant that he is said to be reading "Malachie, son préféré parmi les douze petits prophètes" (165) at the time of the murder, and that it is Percival who asserts this fact? In any case the Book of Malachi enunciates a curse upon priests who mislead their flock, who speak falsely, who protect sinners and oppress "the hireling . . . the widow, and the fatherless," but particularly addresses one such priest who has "dealt treacherously" with "the wife of thy youth . . . yet is she thy companion, and the wife of thy covenant . . . and a book of remembrance was written . . . the day cometh, that shall burn as an oven" (Mal. 2:14, 3:5, 16, 4:1). There is much food here for Nicolas's endless ruminations. But Malachi is, even more interestingly, a book on the *edge*, where Hébert's characters obsessively position themselves; as the last book of the Old Testament (three very slim books further than Habbakuk), it is placed on the textual edge between the Old and the New Testament, without ever reaching, of course, the "newer," and more merciful, commandments of the New.

The "edges" of the book serve many thematic and structural functions: the several overlapping narrations approach closer and closer to the edge of the event, unspoken because unspeakable as well as unknown, the edge of the novel's absent centre, fully revealed only at the very end of Stevens' confession. When the characters themselves reach, are stopped at, fall over that edge, it is in two ways: Nora and Olivia reach the time-stopping moment of their deaths. "*Ah ça! l'horloge de la vie s'est arrêtée tout à l'heure, je ne suis plus au monde,*" says Olivia (200; italics Hébert's) as she crosses over into the life-in-death of her ghostly wave-tossed afterlife. But Stevens and Nicolas are, at that same edgework, pinned into the time-stopped frame of their death-in-life.

The edges manifested in the details of the imagery are diurnal and seasonal (up to the very end of the very last day of summer, the point at which "time," in both senses, stops), topographical ("au bord de la mer" [14 and elsewhere]; "la lisière du ciel et de l'eau" [51]), spatial (the last house in the town, the threshold), and, repeatedly, the tideline on the beach, marked by the seaweed crushed by the feet of Nicolas or Stevens or Percival, following in each other's tracks along the margin between the (male) land-realm and the (female) sea-realm, those border territories of beach and beach house on which the acts of male erotic aggression take place.¹² As in Keats or Rilke, images of getting closer and closer to the edge suggest the unspeakable which is beyond, that which consciousness cannot reach. But this mystery is also put (surprisingly, by Stevens)

in the homely terms of “une femme qui a pris sa couture trop au bord et qui voit son tissu s’effiloche, entre ses doigts” (FB 80; “a woman who’s sewn a seam too close to the edge” [H. 58]), which will inevitably deconstruct itself, ravelling out into non-existence, or at least non-seamness. Stevens sees himself as the Pied Piper, who will of course lead the children of the town away, beyond, over the edge, to their unravelling, linking up with the many fairy-tale motifs of children seeking parents, or parents abandoning children, found in Kogawa and Hébert.

The motif of voyeurism permeates the book; there are numerous reminiscences of *Le voyeur*, Robbe-Grillet’s postmodernist porno-Gothic “absent-centred” novel whose narrative gap, repeatedly approached, but never filled in during the course of the story, also contains a sexual murder, whose victim, like Hébert’s Nora, nibbled by fishes, returns from the sea. Percival, whose act of voyeurism betrays Nicolas to Irène, thus causing her suicide, narrates a whole section based on what he has “seen.” There is something almost Japanese in this eroticism of the look,¹³ in these different “languages” of the look: Naomi’s shame and sense of complicity at perhaps being “seen” in the garage corresponds to Nora’s at being doubly “seen” (Percival seeing Nicolas seeing her) in the bathhouse, as does the repeated advice to the girls not to “look up” at Stevens, for as with the Japanese, to look is to invite victimization. Stevens, who constantly sees others (the girls, the congregation) seeing him, is, himself, often seen darkly, *framed* in the “encadrement” of doorways (a point blurred in the English translation).

In Kogawa the structuring “frames” of imagery which open and close the book are photographs, framed in a quite literal sense, ironically contrasted family portraits: the united family of peacetime (17) is balanced against the cruelly deceptive publicity photograph of “one family, all smiles, standing around a pile of beets” (193); “the small black and white snapshot of a graveyard scene” (of her father [211]) balances the photograph of father, uncle, and the beautiful about-to-be-confiscated boat (21); the photograph of the infant Naomi clutching her mother’s leg recurs (46-47, 242). The emotional point of pages of political comment is compacted into the depiction of Obasan going up into the attic to look for . . . we don’t yet know what, but finding a photograph of the dead Isamu: his deportee’s ID card, which makes a mockery of his “identity,” by framing the picture, his face, in the frame of another culture’s number for him, another man’s white RCMP signature permitting his existence (24, 244).

In fact Isamu, seemingly not as important a character in the story as the three present women and the one present-yet-absent one, is nevertheless central to its imagery. It is he whose saying “It is like the sea” frames the story with his palimpsestic vision of irretrievably inland Alberta somehow containing the waves of the lost Pacific, on one shore or the other of which Isamu, the fisherman, can have his only true being. It is Isamu who finds shellfish fossils there, leading Naomi, the “family historian,” to wonder about “some genealogist of the future”

(225), who will similarly marvel at finding the bones of so many fishermen buried on the prairies, in a kind of “cimetière marin,” as Hébert, echoing Valéry, would say (FB 224). Olivia has the same palimpsestic view of sea and land: “L’avoine se couche au soleil, se relève et moutonne *comme un mer* peu profonde et verte” and the same sense of the seepage of memory into dreams (FB 214-15; italics mine; cf. 199), and Lethbridge, like Cap Sauvagine, is “a city of wind . . . flat as the ocean . . . the edge of the world” (O. 190-91). Naomi postulates of Isamu’s dying moments an almost metaphysical image of man as an inverted tree, as Isamu moves downward toward the subterranean ocean of his earliest memories, seeking a dream or vision by a process proleptically enacting Naomi’s own search for vision through memory, which makes up the book:

Perhaps everything was reversing rapidly and he was tunnelling backwards top to bottom, his feet in an upstairs attic of humus and memory, his hands groping down through the cracks and walls to the damp cellar, to the water, down to the underground sea. Or back to his fishing boats in B.C. . . . In the end did he manage to swim full circle back to that other shore *and his mother’s arms . . . ?* (14; italics mine)

His search, used as an emblem for hers, culminates in the almost verbatim repetition, at the end of the book, of the imagery of the sea/prairie with which it began. Naomi, on her own behalf, also tends to see palimpsestically: “Our attics and living-rooms encroach on each other” (25), as she images her own regressions back to her remembered origins, her return to her father’s arms (170) or to her mother’s (241).

Isamu’s or Naomi’s memory, going in reverse, operates much as Stevens’ does when he images the process of his painful recollections as fishing up drowned cities (FB 238). However, within Hébert’s *text* that image operates to link his confessional procedures with Olivia’s narrative of the ghostly mermaid kingdom under the sea. And Olivia’s account has been, as text, somehow generated by Percival’s vision of her oceanic afterlife: three disjunct narrative voices are thus linked by the textual voice, as we have already seen occurring in Stevens’ and Nicolas’s frame narrations.

It is in Olivia’s mermaid kingdom, suffused with reminiscences of the Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale “La petite sirène,” that Hébert’s subplot of a female identity quest comes to the fore. Not only Andersen’s but also Hébert’s heroine has a grandmother who was especially fond of her granddaughters, serving as the matriarchal governing principle, like a less passive, more dominating Obasan. Stevens, a demonic version of Andersen’s handsome prince, is responsible for Olivia’s loss of the earthly version of this realm. If we look back at Andersen’s baleful parable of female sexual awakening, we find that the mermaid, seeking to go on land as a human girl to seek out the handsome prince, must sacrifice her loveliest quality, her voice, in order to woo him, silently. By a mere coincidence,

of the sort which conceals an underlying shared significance (perhaps a Philomela motif of woman muted), one of Naomi's nightmares comes from the tale of the King bird, who takes out the tongues of children who tell lies. When Olivia recollects her relationship with her dying mother, their poverty, their digging potatoes, the female bonding of their society over against the patriarchal one, and asserts that "ma mémoire ressemblent à ces longues guirlandes d'algues . . ." (200) and that "Le mystère de la vie et de la mort de ma mère n'aura plus de secret pour moi" (211), we are reminded not only of Andersen's companionship of women under the sea, and of the "feminized" Japanese community in the Alberta beet fields, but also, above all, of Naomi's oceanic imagery in her dream of her mother, whose "flailing arms . . . beckon *like seaweed*" (O. 241; italics mine), because, of course, the imagery of the "amniotic deep" is a constant for the female realm.¹⁴ There is nearly as much simile and metaphor from the sea in *Obasan*, where the sea is only a *recollected* setting, as there is in *Les fous de Bassan*, almost entirely set "au bord de la mer."

Naomi, like Nicolas or Stevens "skirt[ing] the edges" of the "whirlpool" of memory (O. 53) with uninterpretable dreams in tandem with unreadable letters (30), whose nightmares are of male violence, death, gruesome injury, and female suffering, is firmly sucked down into that whirlpool by new knowledge, indeed by the "facts" which she has evaded or been deprived of for so long. Her questioning gets ever closer to the long-sought answer as the frames of the story close up on each other toward the end. Her last dreams unite Aunt Emily's string to Obasan's twine (the long thread of the heart), and both to the maypole image of her mother, departing, yet at last returning. And one of the finest elegies in Canadian literature, of the 1980's or of any other decade, seems to complete the elegiac form in the traditional way by (albeit cautiously) reaffirming life: "The song of mourning is not a lifelong song" (246).

Evidently the male characters of Hébert's story are to be seen as a fragmented consciousness, whose various narrative voices (Nicolas, Stevens, Percival, the anonymous plural inhabitants of Griffin Creek)¹⁵ are to be pulled together by the reader into the total of its fragmented narrative perspectives. While Naomi finally succeeds in joining the divergent voices of Emily and Obasan, history and poetry, document and lyric, into the unified elegiac voice of her mother found again in herself, Hébert's reader is left to make an elegy for Griffin Creek from the fragmented confessions of its ghosts and its living dead. Framed voices haunt us from both these books.

NOTES

¹ A much briefer version of this paper was read at "Canadian Writing in the Eighties," MLA, 1985. The phrase "reader as family historian" is from Magdalene Redekop's paper on Alice Munro, and my opening paragraph is an *ex post facto* comment on that panel.

Quotations are taken from *Obasan* (Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1981), from *Les fous de Bassan* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1982), and from *In the Shadow of the Wind*, trans. Sheila Fischman (Toronto: New Press Canadian Classics, 1983), using the abbreviations O., FB, and H. respectively, wherever the reference is not self-explanatory.

² Antoine Sirois, "Bible, Mythes et Fous de Bassan," *Canadian Literature*, 104 (Spring 1985), 178-82, gives an admirable discussion of biblical references in Hébert, but he confines himself largely to those related to Creation and the Fall (i.e., Genesis) rather than developing those related to themes from Revelation and the prophetic books.

³ See John T. Irwin, *Doubling and Incest/Repetition and Revenge* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1975), pp. 64-67, on the fantasy of the reversal of generations, with special reference to Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*.

⁴ Ronald Ewing, in "Griffin Creek: The English World of Anne Hébert," *Canadian Literature*, 105 (Summer 1985), 100-10, defines this component of the story as a historically accurate view of population decline in rural English Quebec (p. 101).

⁵ Joy Kogawa, "The Japanese-Canadian Dilemma," *Toronto Life* (December 1985), p. 32. By this account, Muriel Kitagawa seems to have served as a partial model for Aunt Emily; Kogawa's admiration for her is palpable. See Roy Miki, ed., *This Is My Own: Letters to Wes and Other Writings on Japanese Canadians 1941-1948* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1985), for a selection of sources.

For Kogawa's own deeply serious Christianity — the power of prayer, the importance of love and forgiveness of enemies, and the characteristically oxymoronic conceit of "limp[ing] triumphantly" — see her essay "Is There a Just Cause?," *Canadian Forum*, 63 (March 1984), 20-21, 24. See also an interview "A Matter of Trust," *University of Toronto Review* (Spring 1985), pp. 28-31, for further evidence of her complexly ambivalent relationship (that of "a closet Christian") to traditional Christianity, contrasted to the "arrogance" of institutional Christianity. But Erika Gottlieb's "The Riddle of Concentric Worlds in *Obasan*," *Canadian Literature*, 109 (Summer 1986), 34-53, brilliantly accounts for both time scheme and narrative structure by demonstrating that it is the three days of the Buddhist wake, between Isamu's death and burial, that determines the 'present time' of the narrative, and the recurrent ritual of Buddhist mourning for Naomi's mother that structures, over eighteen years, the 'secret' that three days of meditation on the past must unravel. The article is, further, a fine account of the significance of Naomi's dreams.

⁶ I owe this and other points to stimulating discussions with Dr. Richard Cavell, whose "Dialogic Form in Klein, Kroetsch, and Kogawa" (*Canada Ieri e Oggi* [Fasano: Schena, 1986], 45-53) opens up these questions of absence and presence. Note also that the key letters are written by Grandma Kato to Grandpa Kato, then handed on to Emily, who makes two attempts to bring them to Naomi before Sensei, ventriloquising, finally transmits the mother's voice to her. Ila Goody ("The Stone Goddess and the Frozen Mother: Accomplices of Desire and Death in Tanizaki, *Tay John* and *Obasan*," forthcoming in *Nature and the Search for Identity in Canadian and Japanese Literature*, ed. Tsuruta and Goossen) makes useful comparisons between *Obasan* and several works by the modern Japanese author Junichiro Tanizaki (particularly his "The Bridge of Dreams") in respect to various kinds of narrative obliquity, maskings, and the cruel keeping of secrets, and especially to the obsessive search for and memorialization of the lost, inaccessible mother, a matter highly eroticized in Tanizaki, however.

⁷ Neil B. Bishop, "Energie textuelle et production de sens: images de l'énergie dans

Les fous de Bassan d'Anne Hébert," *UTQ*, 54:2 (Winter 1984/5), 178-99, esp. pp. 179, 186-87.

- ⁸ See Ewing, pp. 102-05, for a cogent account of parallels with *The Sound and the Fury*, in addition to similar but less obvious parallels with Faulkner's *Light in August* (Nicolas resembling Gail Hightower, who sits by his window for years, effectively one of the living dead, until he comes to some understanding of his guilt toward his dead wife; Stevens resembling Joe Christmas, the wanderer and cruel lover of an older woman, perpetrator of the key violence of the book).
- ⁹ See Janet Paterson on the slipping over of "les cris des fous" into "l'écrits des fous" in the self-reflexivity of both Stevens and Nicolas, *Anne Hébert: Architecture Romanesque* (Ottawa: Éditions de l'Université d'Ottawa, 1985), pp. 159-77. She also suggests that *Les fous de Bassan* is fundamentally "anaphoric" in theme and structure in much the same spirit in which I suggest that *Obasan* is fundamentally oxymoronic.
- ¹⁰ See my paper on the "purgatorial heroes" of Joseph Heller, William Golding, and Albert Camus, among others, "One Endless Round": *Something Happened* as Purgatorial Novel," *English Studies in Canada*, 11:4 (December 1985), 438-49, for a fuller discussion of this concept, into which both Stevens and Nicolas fit closely.
- ¹¹ Interview, *Châtelaine*, February 1983.
- ¹² See an unpublished paper read by Kathryn Slott at "Anne Hébert: A Table Ronde," *MLA*, 1985, for fuller development of Hébert's gender-linked topographies.
- ¹³ Gayle K. Fujita ("to attend the sound of stone": The Sensibility of Silence in *Obasan*) [*MELUS*, 1987, forthcoming] discusses the peculiarly Japanese sensibility of the look, and of a certain way of paying attention, finding that the Canadian-Japanese is sufficiently similar to the American-Japanese sensibility to make her sense of ethnic background usable in accounting for *Obasan* in culturally Japanese terms (see also her discussion of the key Japanese children's story "Momotaro"), much as Goody accounts for it in literary Japanese terms. Together they, along with Gottlieb, provide a necessary supplement to my reading in "Canadian" terms.
- ¹⁴ There is another community of women alluded to in Naomi's very name; almost the only book of the Old Testament to provide an affirmative paradigm of female bonding (and even that one has to be read rather selectively) is of course the Book of Ruth. That Naomi is probably the *only* woman's name to be usable in English, Hebrew (in which it means "sweetness," "blessed," or "my joy"), and Japanese (Tanizaki has a novel, recently translated, called *Naomi*, but the name means, in Japanese, "direct, beautiful") probably dictated its choice, and thus Kogawa's chiasmic reversal of the roles of Ruth (the biblical daughter-in-law) and Naomi, but resonances of Keats' Ruth who, in tears, "sighed for home amidst the alien corn" are likely also. See Fujita and Goody for a fuller discussion of the parallels with the Book of Ruth.
- ¹⁵ Neil B. Bishop, "Distance, point de vue, voix et idéologie dans *Les fous de Bassan* d'Anne Hébert," *Voix et images*, 9:2 (Winter 1984), 113-29, comments on the balancing of the collective masculine voice of the town against the collective feminine voice of Olivia's mothers and grandmothers.

N.B.: A translation into French of *Obasan* is underway; there has been for some time a Japanese translation, under the somewhat misleading title of *Ushinawareta sokoku* (i.e., *The Lost Native [or Ancestral] Land*).