## ANNE HEBERT

## Les Invités au procès

D. W. Russell

ES INVITÉS AU PROCÈS, a "poème dramatique et radiophonique" by Anne Hébert, was broadcast July 20, 1952 by Radio-Canada, but remained unpublished until 1967, when it appeared in a volume along with Le Temps sauvage and La Mercière assassinée. The broadcast date, and presumably the period of composition, of Les Invités au procès is roughly that of Le Torrent (1945) and Le Tombeau des rois (published in 1953).2 But while these latter two works have justifiably received considerable critical attention, and while the two other plays published in the same volume in 1967 have attracted much comment, Les Invités has evoked only brief remarks.3 Allusions to Les Invités are found fairly frequently, however, in critical studies of the work of Anne Hébert. Passing references, for example, are made to Les Invités in two separate articles by Albert LeGrand and Grazia Merler dealing mainly with Kamouraska. René Lacôte also mentions Les Invités in his brief remarks on the theatrical works, included in his excellent introduction to the poetry of Anne Hébert. Sometimes the critical remarks on Les Invités are not just slight, they are also slighting. Laurent Mailhot dismisses the play in one short paragraph in Le Théâtre québécois, saying,

Les Invités au procès est une sorte de forêt vierge, dense, riche, mais touffue, aussi fantasque que fantastique, plus romantique que surréaliste, plus symboliste que symbolique.4

And finally, Pierre Pagé, in his work on Anne Hébert published in 1965, two years before *Les Invités* appeared in print, devotes two pages to it, beginning his analysis with a negative judgment:

si nous l'avons retenue ici, ce n'est pas pour sa valeur formelle. Elle est en effet assez compliqué et son unité dramatique est très difficile à percevoir. Les personnages sont un peu trop nombreux, les lieux multiples, l'action dispersée.<sup>5</sup>

He continues, however, to give some small praise to the work, using the image of the forest (later repeated by Mailhot, cited above):

c'est une forêt très dense où l'on trouve l'annonce de tous les thèmes poétiques qui

seront ultérieurement développés: l'amour, la mort, le mal, la culpabilité, la sincérité.

Such a lack of critical enthusiasm for one of her works is not new, of course, to Anne Hébert. We are reminded, for example, that the original publication of the volume of stories, Le Torrent, had to be undertaken at the author's expense, and that the title story, now widely acclaimed, was not always so well received. Similarly, critical views of Le Temps sauvage and La Mercière assassinée have not always been favourable. Now, however, with a greater distance in time from the earlier works, and with additional insights afforded by later works of Mlle Hébert, a more balanced critical view is surely possible. This analysis of Les Invités au procès attempts to show at least one possible path of meaning running through the dark forest, visible some twenty-two years after the work was first presented to the public.

Part of the difficulty that Les Invités presents to the reader is its form. Both Pagé and Mailhot refer to the lack of a clearly unified structure, while Pagé comments that the work shares the same dream-like liberty of action, character, and place as some of the stories of Le Torrent. Although he here seems to be using the reference to the dream-like quality as a negative criticism, Pagé sees this quality as a positive value in his analysis of Les Chambres de bois and Le Torrent. Referring to these two works, he states that the characters exist to fulfill a poetic necessity, not the dictates of traditional literary realism:

ce sont les acteurs d'un monde onirique et leur nécessité est celle du rêve. Comme Perceval ou la bohémienne Amica, ils surgissent lorsque l'âme poétique a besoin de styliser dans un masque, un des multiples états de sa relation au monde.

This statement could apply with even more force to Les Invités au procès, where the form of the work, which is addressed to listeners only, not to readers or spectators, is strikingly similar to a dream sequence. The formal unity of a dream sequence is not, obviously, that of a stage play, but is formulated according to a different kind of "logic." As Gilles Houde reminds us in the introduction to his study of the mythic structure of Le Torrent, the symbolic language of the dream, although at first it may seem incoherent, intensely personal, or even absurd, does in fact have a very strict interior logic. Les Invités au procès is also structured according to this "nécessité du rêve," and its own interior psychological and poetic ordering make it a powerful expression of certain basic human truths.

The last verse of the title poem of *Mystère de la Parole* offers a very significant desinition of the role of the poet:

Que celui qui a reçu fonction de la parole vous prenne en charge comme un coeur ténébreux de surcroît, et n'ait de cesse que soient justifiés les vivants et les morts en un seul chant parmi l'aube et les herbes.<sup>10</sup> The need to establish the harmonious existence of opposites ("que soient justifiés les vivants et les morts en un seul chant") is a major one in this collection of poems, and is repeated, for example, in the poems "Je suis la terre et l'eau", "Eve," and "Des Dieux Captifs." As expressed in these poems, the role of the poet is to help man reconcile the existence of opposites, for such a reconciliation is necessary for real life, for the confrontation of reality "avec toutes ses contradictions existentielles." In Les Invités au procès Anne Hébert has presented us with a parable of a society which has not yet learned to accept this dialectic nature of reality. The examination of the lack of a balance between the opposed qualities of all of life is central to the work. At the end of the play this lack of balance is expressed by Le Voyageur, who explains that the society ("le village") has attempted to hide or deny the dark side of its nature:

C'est le village qui réclamait depuis longtemps cette nappe verte et profonde pour y couler quelques péchés. C'est fou la confiance aveugle qu'ont les hommes dans les chambres de débarras, les prisons, l'enfer et toutes les histoires de même acabit. Un seul petit placard réservé pour son linge sale et l'homme se croit à l'abri de la crasse pour le restant de ses jours.

The folly of this attempt to gain a false purity by hiding part of man's nature has been well shown by the story just related. Père Salin has been the most persistent in this attempt. A major part of his imbalance stems from his denial of the aspects of life usually associated with women, such as beauty, love, passion, tenderness, etc. This denial is shown by the fact that he has killed his wife, Saule, and he declares to his two daughters at the beginning of the play that they are nothing. Replying to the beautiful Aude who has laughed irrepressibly, he says: "Tu es pareille aux autres, ni belle ni laide, stupide, nulle, tout simplement." He refuses to acknowledge the feminine qualities of either beauty or ugliness:

Un jour, j'ai reçu en garde deux petites bonnes femmes d'âge égal. J'ai tiré leurs cheveux derrière leurs oreilles en nattes dures comme des anses de panier. Je leur ai donné des robes épaisses, été comme hiver, des jupes raides, larges comme des cerceaux et longues pour la vie. J'ai appris le travail et le silence à l'une et l'autre. Où est la différence?

The sterility of his refusal to accept even the existence of feminity is symbolized by the landscape of his Inn. It is in the middle of a deserted plain, the roads leading to it are "effacés" and bramble covered, the courtyard is "embroussaillée" and has a "maigre potager." This sterility and isolation came only after the death of Salin's wife, after he has denied the existence of the female principle. Before this time all was the opposite, as Aude recalls:

Autrefois, l'auberge était pleine de monde. Maman souriait dans le soleil. Le jardin éclatait de fruits et de fleurs.

Behind Salin's rejection of the female qualities lies his religious pursuit. His ambitions are twofold: to find his salvation through a faithfulness to the land—literally to uncover a buried treasure in the earth (the relics of a saint); and to find salvation by making his son into the image of a sacrificial offering for the sins of the world (a bouc émissaire or a new Christ who must in fact give up his own physical existence completely for the sake of others). Both these ambitions are thwarted, however; Salin is betrayed by the land, in terms which are evocative of the betrayal of the land in Trente Arpents: 12

J'apprends aujourd'hui que je suis un vieil homme que la terre a trompé. J'ai creusé la terre. Je me suis penché sur la terre. J'ai défait ses plus petites mottes avec mes doigts, avec mes dents. Je l'ai priée, conjurée... Elle me n'a rendu aucun fruit, que son effluve fade au visage. J'ai épousé tous mes champs, l'un après l'autre en une étreinte profonde et rien, rien... Dix années de labeur et de foi vaincues.

His son, Isman, whom he has trained to accept the role of sacrificial offering ("Tu n'échapperas pas à la grandeur et au sacrifice que je t'ai assignées"), is too weak to accept this role. When falsely accused, he commits suicide, and his death cannot exculpate the others. Rather, his suicide leads to the investigation which uncovers the murder and the murderer of Saule. The investigation is begun by the Gendarme (a symbol of society's attempt to explain logically the existence of evil, a representative of imposed order) who says, in reaction to the suicide,

Pardon, pardon, tout ceci me semble irrégulier. Vidons l'étang. Touchons du doigt l'origine du malheur, découvrons les racines de la fleur noir.

Defeated in his attempt to gain salvation by denying part of reality, Salin is won by the very force which he tried to deny. Le Voyageur, the incarnation of dark and hidden desires, becomes the new directing force of Salin and his Inn. As Le Voyageur informs Salin, he has in fact been part of his character in the past:

Tu fus juste, si juste et content de l'être que dès le commencement j'étais en toi.

The new orientation of Salin's life and Inn is symbolized by the colours given the Inn by Le Voyageur: red and black (passion and death) are now the attractions instead of the sterile and isolating atmosphere of the misguided search for spiritual salvation through physical denial. The landscape of the Inn is transformed into a lush garden, with red and black animals and birds, all of it dominated by a strange massive flower in the pond: "une seule fleur immense, noire et lisse avec au centre un stigmate de sang." As well, there are new roads from all parts of the world leading to this garden.

second movement in the play. Now that Salin's family has accepted, even espoused, the existence of all that is symbolized by the heavy enchanting perfume and the colours of the strange flower, there is still the problem of recognizing the existence of opposites, the dialectic nature of reality. The female or physical side of life has now come into its own, but with attendant difficulties. The female qualities are symbolically divided into opposites, Aude representing beauty and physical pleasure, love, joy, etc., Ba representing ugliness, work, self-denial, and suffering. Both girls *dream* of the prince charming, who takes the form of Renaud, and Aude claims him as her own right, while trying to banish the thought of her sister Ba's existence. This single-minded pursuit of perfect physical happiness is as misguided as her father's quest for spiritual treasures, and the recognition of the existence of the opposite qualities is needed for a psychological balance. Thus the hunchback Le Bossu comes out of nowhere to unhorse Renaud and seize Aude (thereby fulfilling the psychic need).

The appearance of Le Bossu, as was that of Renaud, Le Voyageur, and later the Gendarme, is directly related to the psychological needs of Salin and his family — they are present in the play because of the "nécessité du rêve," for it is in dreams that one's unconscious psychological needs are embodied.

Salin, Ba and Isman are all powerless to prevent the rape of Aude, Salin now being only able to help the powers of evil, Ba remaining prisoner to her work ("je ne puis délier mes mains de cette tapisserie"), Isman being constrained to silence and resignation ("Père, vous m'avez voué à ce rôle de silence et d'acceptation. Sans révolte, sans même changer ma douceur, je reçois le mal et la honte"). But Aude (Beauty) refuses to accept the role that must be played psychologically by Le Bossu (the Beast), and finally succeeds in destroying him (as her father had destroyed Saule). This brings a result opposite to what she had expected; the distance between herself and her ideal (Renaud) becomes greater and she becomes prey to the desires and charms of venal love in the person of Le Marchand. She appears eventually in the play as a skeleton, reciting the lines (later found in Le Tombeau des rois):

Je suis une fille maigre
Et j'ai de beaux os.
Je les polis sans cesse
Comme de vieux métaux.
J'ai pour eux des soins attentifs
Et d'étranges pitiés.

Ba questions this destruction of physical beauty:

Tout ce qui fut doux, périssable et cher est défait comme le sable.... Ce moment

où je fus sous l'étang, transformée et pétrie à nouveau par l'amour, était-il donc suffisant pour que la mort de notre soeur s'accomplit aux mains des hommes, ses amants?

Under the new rule of the Inn, all levels of society are attracted to come and express their hidden dark desires, to rid themselves of their secret evil wishes and to express the reverse of their public selves. For example, the aristocratic mother of Renaud, no doubt wanting the best for her son, wishes that he will never know love or suffering:

UN ENFANT — Qui donc s'est juré d'empêcher le Chevalier de toucher à l'amour?

UNE FEMME — J'ai vu la mère du Chevalier faire un voeu au bord de l'étang!

and

L'ENFANT — Qui donc s'est juré d'empêcher le Chevalier de toucher à la douleur?

LA FEMME — La mère du Chevalier a fait un voeu.

In effect, Renaud, like Aude, initially persists in ignoring the existence of ugliness and suffering, since he refuses to even consider Ba as he tries to find Aude. He only pays attention to her when she is transformed physically, but he still cannot bear to see her hands "marquées de travail et de malheur". When Ba does show him her hands, he flees:

Ba! Folle! Tu as enlevé tes gants! Je vois la douleur et le mystère à toi liés. Je vois le fantôme d'Aude qui passe dans un manteau bleu! Je ne puis supporter cela. Je fuis! Adieu, douce, belle petite fille, tendre petit visage, ô prunelles violentes. Ba!

Later, when he sees her hands again (this time they are wounded):

RENAUD — Que les mains de Ba soient enfouies dans la nuit! Effacez les lignes des ses paumes! Que nul n'y puisse lire quelque sombre destin. Cachez la vérité qui jure sur la robe claire.

BA — Renaud, comme tu me rejettes.

RENAUD — Que la nuit te reprenne ainsi que si tu n'avais jamais existé. Pour moi, je serai tranquille. O la douce chambre d'enfant! Ma mère veille à la porte et chasse la vie indiscrète et sournoise.

AUDE — Et moi, Renaud, me chassera-t-elle aussi? Je suis détruite et si calme. Le vent me balance à ta porte comme un arbre sans racines. Un jour, tu me verras, face à face, et tu mourras comme le Bossu.

RENAUD — Non! Ma mère, renforcez ma prison, étouffez-moi que je ne découvre pas le visage rongé sous le manteau bleu.

Renaud's refusal to countenance either ravaged physical beauty (death) or suffering (in life) is a flight from reality and an attempt to retreat to the security of childhood. His mother is only too ready to help him in his attempt to avoid reality.

Ba alone succeeds in reconciling the existence of the opposites of suffering and love. She, like Aude, has dreamed of the perfect lover, Renaud, but when rejected by him she throws herself into the strange pool dominated by the giant flower. By doing so she has accepted the existence of suffering and death as part of love and life, and she emerges from the water transformed physically, except for her hands. She recounts her experience:

C'est un pauvre amour qui m'a toute lissée, du fond de l'étang. Comme j'allais m'enfoncer en cette tendresse, j'ai joint mes mains pour prier, cela a fait surgir une force terrible dans mes poignets et je suis remontée à la surface, guidée par mes anciennes mains qui refusaient de mourir.

Now she is accepted by Renaud for her beauty, but she is still conscious of suffering and death:

BA — Je vois le fond de l'eau et la douleur qui est dans la mort!

RENAUD — Tais-toi. Dès que je me penche sur toi, tu me parles du mal qui habite le monde.

BA — Le mal est grand, Renaud.

In the end, when the body of Saule, her mother, is discovered at the bottom of the pool, the transformation of Ba is seen by herself as follows:

En une seconde naissance plus glorieuse que la première, voici que j'émerge de la profondeur de cette femme ténébreuse possédée du désir insatiable de fleurir au soleil.

Ba is the only one ready to fully accept life, to take possession of the contradictions of existence, and to "blossom in the sun." No other member of her society is equal to this arduous task of grasping life in all its complexity. Instead, the people around her at the Inn plunge on towards their own destruction as they try to exorcise the source of evil by condemning first Salin, then Jasmin. Le Voyageur returns in response to their desire to deal justly, that is, to condemn, classify, and forget the criminals, and he helps them to perform this rite. Le Voyageur reminds them, however, that in doing this act of judgment they are also affecting themselves:

Et pour Salin, qu'avez-vous décidé? Comment le marquerez-vous pour l'Eternité? Et quels fins stigmates prendrez-vous sur vous en retour, bonnes gens? Car il y a le signe de celui qui est marqué et le signe de celui qui marque.

In fact, all these people share some degree of guilt, since they have all been attracted to the Inn by their own inner dark desires which they had hidden until they succumbed to the strange perfume of the black flower. They refuse to accept this guilt, however, preferring to believe that if they can condemn someone else as the source of the evil they will be freed of having to accept their own darker instincts.

Le Voyageur, who functions only to fulfil the people's own desires, hastens to finish his task, and it seems all will be destroyed, including Ba. But in the end it is revealed that Le Voyageur has made a pact with his opposite, Le Bedeau, and the Innocents are rescued:

Le sacristain s'impatiente dans sa voiture neuve. Il n'aime pas l'atmosphère de ces lieux, cet homme. Bon, rendons-lui les Innocents, comme il en a été décidé. Drôle d'idée! Enfin, moi, ça ne me regarde pas. (Commandant) Que les Innocents rejoignent le Bedeau! Il les ramènera au village. Repatrié, le petit pendu! La terre bénite sera creusée, proprement derrière l'église pour lui faire fête. Et la fille au manteau bleu, dans la nuit, lui parlera d'égal à égal. Allons, en route bel équipage! Voici Ba et Renaud et cet autre enfant qui est sans nom. Recollez-moi tout cela à la vie quotidienne! Ah! singulier voyage! En voiture, triste enfance! Le voeux des Morts vous accompagnent, sans rompre aucun silence.

The younger generation is spared to continue life, but their future appears rather ambiguous. Isman and Aude will still be "le petit pendu" and "la fille au manteau bleu," although their deaths will be consecrated by the Church. Renaud, one suspects, will still remain a child at heart. Ba may be faced with a life that is a "singulier voyage," a "triste enfance," despite her insatiable desire to "fleurir au soleil." It is only later, in Mystère de la Parole, that Anne Hébert presents a persona who is able to seize existence fully, as we see expressed triumphantly in the final stanza of the collection:

Incarnation, nos dieux tremblent avec nous! La terre se fonde à nouveau, voici l'image habitable comme une ville et l'honneur du poète lui faisant face, sans aucune magie: dure passion.

When Les Invités au procès is seen as a dream parable which examines the need for the establishment of an equilibrium between the opposites which constitute reality, the underlying dramatic unity becomes evident. That the listener should attempt to interpret the work as a parable, or modern myth, is also, it seems, to be expected, given the unrealistic nature of the play. The title suggests that the listener is one of those summoned or invited to a trial. The very names of the persons on trial suggest their psychological symbolism. Two names seem to be deliberate French-English puns: Saule - soul and Isman - is man. Salin, by killing Saule, has attempted to destroy the soul, or the anima in Jungian terms, and he is trying to make his son into a vehicle for the sins of all Man; he wishes his son to be Man. On a descriptive level, the names of Salin and Jasmin are equivalent to their psychological roles: Salin brings the sterility of salinity (such as found in the Dead Sea, for example), while Jasmin brings the odour of sanctity (the holy relics are his property, here associated with the strong perfume of the white flowers of jasmine; Saule was murdered because she was thought to be the lover of Jasmin). The names of Aude and Renaud bring with them the

appropriate idealized physical qualities of their medieval counterparts: Aude, or Alde, the sister of Olivier and the beloved of Roland, and Renaud, the knight valiant of *Renaut de Montauban*.<sup>13</sup> That it is impossible for such idealized abstractions of feminity and masculinity to exist in real life becomes obvious in the course of the narrative. Finally, Ba, who initially is low ("bas") in the estimation of her family and society, regains the qualities of Saule (and soul) in her rebirth in the water.

While the listener to Les Invités participates as a spectator at the trial, he becomes aware that it is also himself and his own society which are on trial. On one level Les Invités can be recognized as a condemnation of Jansenism, as exemplified by Salin (a similar condemnation of Jansenism has been found by critics elsewhere in Anne Hébert's works), and on a more general level Les Invités au procés condemns all psychic imbalance, every attempt to deny or ignore the dialectic nature of all reality, both in individuals and in societies.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Anne Hébert, Le Temps sauvage, La Mercière assassinée, Les Invités au procès, Collection L'Arbre G-2, Montreal: HMH, 1967.
- Anne Hébert, Le Torrent, Contes, Montreal: Beauchemin, 1950, new edition, Montreal: HMH, 1963 (Le Torrent is dated 1945 in the text); Le Tombeau des rois, Québec, 1953, and, in Poèmes, Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1960 (the title poem was first published the same year as Les Invités was broadcast, in Esprit 20 [October 1952], 443-46).
- See, for example, Pierre Pagé, Anne Hébert, Ecrivains canadiens d'aujourd'hui, Montreal: Fides, 1965; René Lacôte, Anne Hébert, Poètes d'aujourd'hui, Paris: Seghers, 1969; Laurent Mailhot, "Anne Hébert ou le temps dépaysé," in Jean-Cléo Godin et Laurent Mailhot, Le Théâtre québécois, Montreal: HMH, 1970, pp. 123-50. Both Pagé and Mailhot give brief bibliographies of studies of the work of Anne Hébert, and a more recent bibliography is found in Grazia Merler, "La Réalité dans la prose d'Anne Hébert," Ecrits du Canada français, 33 (1971), p. 82, note 1. In addition to the articles listed by Dr. Merler, we add Albert LeGrand, "Kamouraska' ou l'Ange et la Bête," Etudes françaises VII, ii (1971), 119-43, and F. M. Macri, "Anne Hébert: Story and Poem," Canadian Literature, 58 (Autumn 1973), 9-18.
- 4 Mailhot, op cit., p. 126.
- <sup>5</sup> Pagé, op. cit., p. 61.
- <sup>6</sup> For example, see Bertrand Lombard's review in Revue de l'Université Laval, January 1951 (cited by Albert LeGrand in "Anne Hébert: de l'exil au royaume," Etudes française, IV, 1 (1968), p. 21), and Pagé, op. cit., pp. 30-33, who comments on Gilles Marcotte's revised opinion, expressed in his review of the second edition of Le Torrent (La Presse, 18 January 1964, as opposed to Le Devoir, 25 March 1950).
- <sup>7</sup> See Mailhot, op. cit., p. 145; he contrasts the negative views of Guy Beaulne and Clément Locquell with the mixed view of Gilles Marcotte and the positive view of

- G. A. Vachon. Mailhot himself gives a sympathetic treatment of the plays, except for Les Invités.
- <sup>8</sup> Although occasionally, for the sake of brevity, *Les Invités* will be referred to as a "play" in this analysis, the distinction between a stage play and a "poème dramatique et radiophone" will always be understood.
- <sup>9</sup> See Gilles Houde, "Les Symboles et la structure mythique du Torrent," *La Barre du jour*, 16 (October-December 1968), p. 27.
- <sup>10</sup> Anne Hébert, *Poèmes*, Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1960, p. 75.
- <sup>11</sup> Anne Hébert, "Quand il est question de nommer la vie tout court, nous ne pouvons que la balbutier," *Le Devoir*, 22 October 1960. In this short prose text Mlle Hébert elaborates on the necessity of coming to grips with reality that has "contradictions existentielles." (Also printed in *Québec: Hier et aujourd'hui*, ed. Laurier Lapierre, *et al.*, Toronto: Macmillan 1967, pp. 278-81.)
- <sup>12</sup> In Ringuet's *Trente Arpents* (1938), Montreal: Fides, 1971, Euchariste is shown caressing the earth with his hand when he is at the height of his fortune as a farmer (pp. 183-84), then later, when the notary has stolen his savings, Euchariste slips in the mud and falls to the earth (p. 261). His uncle Ephrem's death had also been seen as an unwanted divorce from a beloved woman his land (p. 58).
- <sup>13</sup> The latter is edited by F. Castets (Montpellier, 1909); trans. H. Berthaut, as Les Quatre fils Aymon (Paris, 1952).
- <sup>14</sup> See, for example, Georges Amyot, "Anne Hébert et la renaissance," Ecrits du Canada français, 20 (1965), p. 246:
  - "... la renaissance de notre poète est à la mesure même de cette révolte. Je pense que je n'ai pas besoin d'expliquer contre quoi le poète s'est révolté. La 'vieille femme envieuse' c'est le jansénisme, et tout ce qu'il traîne avec lui d'hypocrisie ascétique, de dépouillement dans la crainte, de macération et de masochisme. Oui, Garneau a permis la libération, mais c'est Anne Hébert qui l'a réalisée. Et voici qui pour nous, Canadiens français, est particulièrement émouvant."

Explicit reference to the condemnation of Jansenism is also found in Albert LeGrand, "Anne Hébert: de l'exil au royaume," and in Pagé, op. cit., pp. 22-36, 83-84 (analysing Le Torrent and Le Temps sauvage), and Lacôte, passim.

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