

ANNE HEBERT

A Pattern Repeated

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IN *LES CHAMBRES DE BOIS*,¹ Anne Hébert tells a simple story with few characters, little action, an uncomplicated plot. Amid the bleakness of a mining town, Catherine, the heroine, brings up her sisters under the shadow of her brooding, silent father. She encounters, in a Gothic atmosphere of misty forests and a forbidding ancestral mansion, the young and sensitive *seigneur*, Michel. He carries her off to Paris where they both hope to escape the prison of their unhappy, loveless pasts. But, Michel, an *artiste manqué*, imprisons her in *les chambres de bois*, a stifling world of dreams. Michel's sister, Lia, arrives and the two siblings, caught in a strange and destructive relationship, exclude Catherine who finally falls deathly ill. In one last desperate gesture of defiance, Catherine leaves Michel and Lia and goes to recuperate in the sunny Mediterranean. Here she meets the earthy Bruno and becomes attuned, once again, to the natural, real world.

Anne Hébert's language is sparse and precise, *dépouillé*. Time and space are anonymous, and are, in fact, internalized; the real time and space of the novel exist *within* the characters, *within* their dreams, *within* the confined world created by Michel and Lia in their *chambres de bois*. The tone of this novel, its symbolic language, its deceptive simplicity, its timeless, spaceless quality, its paradoxical concrete abstractness are reminiscent of a fable. It is a story of a journey through death and stagnation into life, of the affirmation of life, and of the struggle of life against the forces of darkness, death and evil. The movement experienced in this novel and reflected symbolically through language, theme and image is the repetition of a pattern developed within individual poems and throughout the body of Anne Hébert's work.

The clear and dramatic development that occurs in Anne Hébert's writing, is a development that can be traced from her earliest poems, *Les Songes en équilibre*, through to her latest novel, *Kamouraska*, and to the poems in *Mystère de la parole* and her most recent poems. Moreover this development is reflected in microcosm in both the poem, "Le Tombeau des rois", and in *Les Chambres de bois*. In fact, a very close affinity exists between the volume of poetry *Le Tombeau des rois* and *Les Chambres de bois*:

Il y a, entre *Le Tombeau des rois* et *Les Chambres de bois*, plusieurs rapprochements, même anecdotiques, qu'il nous paraît important de relever. La thématique du roman est précisément celle des poèmes: le langage symbolique des *Chambres de bois* fait écho à celui du recueil; enfin, la technique structurale du roman est éclairée par le lien secret qui joint les uns aux autres les poèmes.²

In *Les Songes en équilibre*, the young poet explores the external world, composing a type of inventory about what she sees and feels; she is discovering the world:

Laissez-moi mes yeux!
Laissez mes yeux
Courir sur le monde
Comme la couleur sur la mer!

(“Tableau de grève”, *Songes*)

It is a world clouded with *songes* which represent a way of interpreting and dealing with the reality that begins to close in on her. The basic emotions here are a combination of joy and melancholy.

Le Tombeau des rois carries us into a world where the poet has some experience in the Blakean sense. Here and in *Les Chambres de bois* and in the short stories, the poet explores the inner world to the limits of anguish and death; she descends into herself, into hell, into *les chambres fermées* towards the realm of death, confronts death and either emerges victorious like the falcon in “Le Tombeau des rois”, with “les prunelles crevées”, like Catherine into the arms of Bruno, or succumbs to the raging river, and death, like Francois in *Le Torrent*.

Then, with *Mystère de la parole* and *Kamouraska*, the poet bursts into a vigorous, joyful affirmation of life and the poetic word, an acceptance of the self and the world, a delight in passion with all its accompanying sorrows and ecstasies:

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.³

Not only is the poet's vision altered, but also her style and language. In *Le Torrent* and *Les Songes en équilibre* the language is personal, subjective, effusive like the rush of the torrent, a little undisciplined, but already revealing the precise, cutting images so characteristic of Anne Hébert. In *Le Tombeau des rois* and *Les Chambres de bois*, the image is more concise, the language sparse, controlled, even more *depouillé*. The experience is still subjective but has been assimilated and carefully moulded into the form and structure. The language is as clear and limpid as a deep pool, though in the case of the novel, it appears stilted and enclosed.

In *Mystère de la parole* and later poems, “Le jour qui fut”, “Pluie”, “Fin du monde”,⁴ and in *Kamouraska*, there is a mature, sophisticated control of language and form. Here we find a richness — not the undisciplined effusions of adolescence, nor the awkward, too deliberate exactitude of an author seeking a style, but

the richness of a maturity of expression and vision. The lines of *Mystère de la parole* roll on, long, expansive, overflowing; the sentences in *Kamouraska* are short but energetic, comprising the abrupt thoughts of a harassed woman; both works abound with a wealth of emotion and imagery not found in *Chambres* or *Le Tombeau des rois*. We have moved from a poetry of silence and immobility, through *le tombeau des rois* and *les chambres de bois* towards a *poésie de la parole* and movement, from *Les Chambres de bois* which says little to *Kamouraska* which tells all.

We then discover that the movement within *Chambres* is similar to that within the poem, "Le Tombeau des rois": descent into the tomb or room (self), confrontation with death and, finally, a mutilated but promising affirmation of life. It must not be forgotten that this "rebirth" of Catherine in Part Three is not without drawbacks, for Bruno never takes on a strong or vital character and we are left wondering whether Catherine will fall passive victim to just another man's desires, different though they may be from Michel's. Similarly, the child who emerges from the tomb, in the poem, does so with "les prunelles crevées".

This descent into the self, symbolized by the *chambres de bois*, the tombs of kings, the long night, in order to explore and confront the limits of death and silence, to struggle through fever, against "la main sèche qui cherche le coeur pour le rompre" (*Poèmes*, p. 61), and this re-emergence into the light of dawn, is a recurring movement in the poems, stories and novels. *Les Chambres de bois* can thus be seen as drawing together the themes and images of *Le Tombeau des rois* and becomes a culminative prose expression of the poetic concerns of that volume. It almost seems as if Anne Hébert found it necessary to repeat, in prose, once again, that process she ceaselessly explores in the poetry of *Le Tombeau des rois*. By focussing firstly on the themes, then on the images and finally on the symbols that insist their way through her work, we can further understand the development of Anne Hébert's work. The image forms the core of her work. From the images are constructed the structural and thematic patterns of the novel. The precise and emotive images that haunt the reader with their strange and impressionistic accuracy comprise Anne Hébert's chief mode of perception and expression.

BASICALLY one theme permeates the whole of this novel, as well as most of the poems in *Le Tombeau des rois*, the short stories and the plays. Anne Hébert continually recreates "l'expression littéraire d'une incapacité de vivre".⁵ Man confronted by the bleakness, the harshness, the despair of his existence, appalled by the spectre of death ("Une petite morte/s'est couchée en travers de la porte"),⁶ recoils from life, from the fact of death, retreats into himself, into *la chambre fermée*: "Nous nous forçons de vivre à l'intérieur".⁷ Here he experi-

ences a type of living death, (“Nous menons une vie si minuscule et tranquille”),⁸ dwelling in the past, in some lost and fantastic childhood, locked in silence. He either remains there like Michel in this “Chambre fermée / Coffre clair ou s’enroule mon enfance / Comme un collier désenfilé”,⁹ or rebels violently, fatally like François in “Le Torrent”. Some poems are concerned with the “inventory” of *les chambres de bois*, others with articulating the despair of being locked in one’s childhood, in silence, in the past, in “ce doux ravin de gel / en guise de mémoire”, cut off from the world. The other alternative chosen by Catherine, by Isabelle, Lucie, Sébastien (*Le Temps sauvage*), by the child in “Le Tombeau des rois”, is to escape to a more open and satisfying life. It is only in *Mystère de la parole* that the “poet” accepting the earth in all its beauty and horror can partake in a genuine rebirth or incarnation.

This “incapacité de vivre” is a common trait of Anne Hébert’s characters: “Je me gardais de la vraie connaissance qui est expérience et possession” cries François in *Le Torrent*. Why is he, like Michel and Lia, “un enfant dépossédé du monde”? Why does Michel insist upon *un refus de la vie, du réel*? What is Michel’s strange attraction for death? And, above all, why is the main response to this despair a refuge into the dream, the chamber, the *château*, the night or the barren wilderness? What is this *absence* that envelops the characters like a cloak of anguish: this absence without, which is the rejection of the forces of life, this absence within, which is symbolic of an incapacity to love: “Je me pendrai / A la place de son cœur absent” (“La Fille maigre”, *Poèmes*). Only during that one hour between day and night is Michel “sauvé de toute absence et de toute crainte”, is Michel capable of caressing his wife, Catherine.

Isolated and embittered, Claudine, François’ mother in *Le Torrent*, lives in the forest with her son. By depriving herself and her child of any human warmth, she hopes to compensate for bearing an illegitimate child.

Agnes, in *Le Temps sauvage*, equally embittered, attempts to isolate her family in the mountains. By living in seclusion she aspires to avoid the pain that life inflicts, the pain she once suffered when she lost her fiancé to her sister.

Michel and Lia, bound by strange loyalties, tainted forever by the arrogance, pride and depravity of an aristocratic but decaying family for whom affection does not exist, only indolence, ostentation and cruelty, shut themselves up in *les chambres de bois* in a futile existence of half-read books, unfinished paintings, and childhood memories.

Agnes in *Le Temps sauvage* articulates the nature of this barren existence: “La plus grande réussite de ce monde, ce serait de demeurer parfaitement secret, à tous à soi-même, sans âge ni raison, ni responsabilité, une espèce de temps sauvage, hors du temps et de la conscience” (*Le Temps sauvage*). The inner self becomes a kind of locked cabinet, containing dark and mysterious secrets. Is not this long,

monotonous season, unmarked by age or reason or responsibilities, a kind of wild time beyond time and consciousness, the very goal of Michel?

This feeling of exile that Anne Hébert is continually expressing in one form or another has its seeds (in the terms of reference provided by her writing) in the alienating experience of family life, of a deprived or lonely childhood, a morbid past, in the harsh, unrelenting land and climate; seeds which fall on fertile ground in the sensitive, neurotic, passive natures of Anne Hébert's protagonists. Moreover, Anne Hébert's preoccupation with this "absence au réel", this "refus du présent",¹⁰ can be traced to the kind of Catholicism prevalent in Quebec with its Jansenist orientation:

Tout notre passé est inscrit dans cette séduction de l'absence et tout notre présent est au travail dans cette inexorable métamorphose de l'oeuvre, dans ce voyage souterrain vers la lumière, vers la possession et l'accomplissement [...] la présence n'est acquise qu'à travers une absence vécue jusqu'à l'absurde. Il y a toute la nuit à traverser pour retrouver l'aube et tout l'irréel à arpenter avant d'accéder de nouveau à une géographie de l'homme. Les diverses modalités d'une absence habitée par la tentation de la mort donnent à l'oeuvre d'Anne Hébert sa dimension tragique.¹¹

But it is not the *reason* as much as the *portrayal* of this state of being that concerns Anne Hébert. This, then, leads us to the other themes which form an intricate part of the "incapacité de vivre". These are the themes of childhood, the past, dreams, death, solitude and silence, enclosed space (and time) and finally, the inability to love.

If we pause for a moment and reflect upon these prevalent themes, we realize that this obsession with closed rooms, memories, dreams, the past, solitude, is really an obsession with enclosed time and space. Anne Hébert's most intriguing image stems from her various renderings of this enclosed space. The title of the novel, *Les Chambres de bois*, is vital proof of that. The enclosed space, be it tomb or *château*, is symbolic of a soul closed in upon itself, of a stultified inner existence, of a neurotic self-obsession. Many of the poems in *Le Tombeau des rois* develop around this image and it is interesting to note, at this point, some of the correspondences between these poems and the novel.

In "Vieille Image", it becomes necessary to burn the *château*, relic of childhood days; the *château* described here reminds us of the home of Michel and Lia: "Ce mirage de château / A la droite / De notre enfance" (*Poèmes*). In "Un Mur à peine", the poet is drained of life, is enclosed in a walled garden because of the "liens durs / Que j'ai noués / En je ne sais quelle nuit secrète / Avec la mort!" (*Poèmes*).

The voice of "La Chambre fermée" could well be that of Catherine, crying out, "Qui donc m'a conduite ici?". She describes this "chambre fermée" where she is

placed like a sacrificial Christ, arms spreadeagled, her heart cut from her breast. The last verse foreshadows the novel:

Laisse, laisse le feu teindre
La chambre de reflets
Et mûrir et ton coeur et ta chair;
Tristes époux tranches et perdus.

(*Poèmes*)

Do not “tristes époux tranches et perdus” inhabit *les chambres de bois*, and is not Catherine set to “ripen” into a beautiful playmate for Michel within those rooms?

The poem entitled “La Chambre de bois” is closely linked to the novel, and, again, the voice emerging from the poem could be Catherine’s. The inhabitant dwells there, imprisoned with her anguished senses while life surges at her window: “La place du monde flambe comme une forge / L’angoisse me fait de l’ombre / Je suis nue et toute noire sous un arbre amer” (*Poèmes*).

The poem “Vie de château” describes a life that has a clear affiliation with the life led by Michel and Catherine. I quote it in full:

C’est un château d’ancêtres
Sans table ni feu
Ni poussière ni tapis.

L’enchantement pervers de ces lieux
Est tout dans ses miroirs polis.

La seule occupation possible ici
Consiste à se mirer jour et nuit.

Jette ton image aux fontaines dures
Ta plus dure image sans ombre ni couleur.

Vois, ces glaces sont profondes
Comme des armoires
Toujours quelque mort y habite sous le tain
Et couvre aussitôt ton reflet
Se colle à toi comme une algue

S’ajuste à toi, mince et nu,
Et simule l’amour en un lent frisson amer.

(*Poèmes*)

Here we find the same spartan inventory of furniture as in the novel. There is the same futile preoccupation of gazing in the mirror at oneself, that is, delving into one’s inner self. As the novel illustrates, the hazard of this preoccupation is that “toujours quelque mort y habite sous le tain”. The “dead man” who feigns love in a slow bitter shudder bears a strong resemblance to “l’étrange amour de Michel”.

In “Le Tombeau des rois” we find that the enclosed space has narrowed from a *château* to a chamber to become, finally, a tomb, the resting place of corpses, the space that encloses death.

In *Les Chambres de bois*, we move from the seigneurial mansion, “trapue aux fenêtres longues et étroites”, from Catherine’s home where her recluse father “parût apaise au coeur de sa maison bien close” into *les chambres de bois*, “ces deux seules pièces lambrissées de bois, aux meubles anciens, aux bibelots rares, aux objets usuels incommodes ou abîmés.”

As if this tiny apartment were not small enough, Michel constructs “une petite maison de paille”, composed of his narrow iron cot and his piano, so that he can retire even further into his solitude. He then proceeds to fashion another tiny camping ground, “au coin du feu, en cet espace réduit” for himself and Lia, where “des verres, des livres, des cigarettes, des cendriers débordants de mégots s’entassèrent sur le tapis et marquèrent les places de Michel et Lia”. Their life is now encompassed by this “espace réduit”. Excluded from all this, Catherine has found her own space: “Catherine s’enfermait volontiers dans le petit cabinet de toilette qui était tout en glaces.” She amuses herself with “la seule occupation possible ici / Consiste à se mirer jour et nuit.” But when she leaves the *chambres de bois* to recuperate at the seaside, the space opens up, the land spreads towards the sea, the windows of her bedroom look out over gardens, over the sea and much of her time is spent in the open air. In this way, Anne Hébert attempts to create a feeling of freedom and release.

IT IS INTERESTING TO note that in *Mystère de la parole*, the image of rooms or houses expands into cities; these, with their brimming, bustling life become the key image; we pass out from the cloistered rooms to mingle in the life of the city. By existing in a tiny space where little happens Michel hopes to make time stand still. For him, real time exists in the bittersweet years of his childhood, real space in the faraway family home. Both are beyond his reach, especially when Lia sells the estate to her lover.

Lia has sought to expand her experience of time and space, her memories are not just childhood fantasies but memories of her lover; she has visited far and distant lands; she attempts to present a piano concert. But when her experience of love grows bitter, when her concert is a failure, like a wounded animal, she seeks shelter in the comfort of the arid existence created by her brother. By attempting to make time stand still, by further and further narrowing their space of habitation, Michel and Lia hope to avoid pain by avoiding experience. And enclosed time becomes a metaphor of enclosed space and vice versa. In a small apartment with the curtains drawn, one can barely distinguish between night and day, mark the passing of the seasons.

However, the result of this desperate retreat from the motion and flow and dimension that constitute the forces of life is a withdrawal into the self. Then, time is perceived in terms of memory, as an ever-present past. Feeding upon oneself, in this way, becomes a destructive and sadistic act. The time and space that Michel inhabits is that of his own inner self. But what a barren, frozen, tormented place that is! Its main quality being that of *absence*, what a desperate existence he has sentenced himself to! And so, the cluttered and gloomy apartment is merely the metaphor of his own close and unhappy soul.

To prevent external time and space from encroaching upon him, Michel insists upon living in the dark; he does his work by night and sleeps during the day, frantically avoiding the sunlight. "Il ne faut pas reveiller Michel, le jour l'irrite et le blesse; moins il en a, plus il vit," Lia informs Catherine.

Catherine attempts to share this constricted world of Michel. But the memories of the past that haunt Michel are not real to her and she is stifled in the tiny apartment: "Moi, j'ai toujours aimé le jour et l'été." She wants to run barefoot in the puddles — to feel the earth pulsing beneath her feet. She, unlike Michel and Lia, does not possess the deep and mysterious resources of the self that subsume any desire to dwell in the present and to experience the flow of life around them. She is, in many ways, a superficial person, a passive person; yet the profoundness of Michel and Lia, tormented as they are, does not seem particularly enviable.

Closely allied to this incapacity to live, is the inability to love. Here is another theme that permeates Quebec literature. Love in the novel is either an act of desperation or violence, tragically resolved, or at best, a calm and sensible agreement between two people. These relationships are sketchily portrayed, they erupt quickly, and no other alternative seems feasible. In other words, they are not developed realistically. But this tends to enhance the fable-like quality of the novel. Anne Hébert does not intend to delve into the psychology of her characters, their lives or emotions; she wishes to suggest a certain state of being, evoke a certain mood. We are in the realm of stark charcoal sketches, not rich oil paintings.

We have seen how images of *châteaux*, *chambres de bois*, develop the theme of enclosed space, of *un refus de la vie*. It is these images that form, enhance, and reveal the themes of the novel. Words for Anne Hébert become symbols and we can observe how these symbols thread their way throughout the entire body of her work and complement her thematic concerns. Her most effective and striking symbols seem to fall into three corresponding categories: the body, nature and the house. There is a correlation between the components of these categories. For example, the parts of the body such as eyes, heart, hands (fingers), breath (song), bones correspond to water (rain, fountains), forest, branches, wind, trees in nature which in turn correspond to mirrors (windows), rooms (houses, tombs), furniture, piano (music) in the house or *château*. These corresponding phenomena tend to perform similar symbolic functions and to supplement each other.

Let us now examine three of these symbols which occur in the novel: eyes, hands and bones. Eyes, mirrors, and water are modes of perception: eyes gaze outward into the external world, mirrors and water are instruments for reflection, for looking at and into oneself, “les prunelles pareilles / A leur plus pure image d'eau” (Il y a certainement quelqu'un,” *Poèmes*).

Anne Hébert is often concerned with the concept of “transparence”: windows and the surface waters of pools should be transparent so that one can clearly see into the life of things. Catherine is associated with this transparence — there is little pretence or illusion clouding her soul. In the opening pages, there is an emphasis on cleaning windows covered with soot from the blast furnaces, and Catherine insists on “tout transparence refaite à mesure”. So when Catherine observes herself in mirrors, it is “sans que son image mièvre la trompât, reflétée au passage dans les glaces des vitrines”. And when she tries to imagine herself as an infant as she gazes into the mirror, she is greeted, instead, by images of her little sisters at home, reminding her of her true nature and dispelling all illusion.

However, for Michel, such an occupation must be an “enchantement pervers” for in his case “toujours quelque mort y habite sous le tain”. Unlike Catherine he is not transparent; what lies beneath his polished surface is too deep, mysterious and disturbing for the mirror to reflect a true image.

Water is even a more profound and complex symbol: “La vie la plus belle et la plus forte devait ressembler à cela: une eau transparente et vive, sans jamais revenir en arrière, renouvelant ses images à mesure.”¹²

Clear waters reflect a lucid image. But waters are deep and dark and to sink into them is to sink into a dream, into death.

L'eau de ces bois sombres
Et si pure et si uniquement fluide
Et consacrée en cet écoulement de source
Vocation marine où je me mire.

(“Les Grandes Fontaines”, *Poèmes*)

Water is the source of the creation of life, the symbol of the mysterious depths of the creative soul. It is also, as in *Le Torrent*, the destroyer of life, the symbol of death. It forms one of the elemental forces of life from the time of the separation of the earth and the waters. In *Mystère de la parole*, Anne Hébert writes “Je suis la terre et l'eau . . .”. The flow of water cleanses and purifies like the baptismal waters. Catherine, hurt by Michel and Lia's disparaging remarks, lets the water flow over her hands as if they were raw wounds, hoping to wash away the pain. Michel, dreaming of a purified Lia, calls to her: “Lia, tu es lavée comme l'eau, ma soeur eau, c'est toi, Lia.”

Catherine experiences her “resurrection” by the sea. Thus, water draws its

wealth as a symbol from sources in the Bible and religious rituals, as well as from the rivers and pools of the forest, from nature.

Hands are symbols of giving and receiving; they are instruments of utility and creativity; they are symbolic of one's total being, of the relationship between one's inner self and the outer world. In the poem, "Les Mains", the girl's hands are an intermediary between herself and the world, they are making futile gestures and

Les signes du monde
Sont gravés à même ses doigts.

Tant de chiffres profonds
L'accablent de bagues massives et travaillées.

(*Poèmes*)

Like Catherine, this girl's hands are "cette offrande impitoyable / Des mains de douleurs parées / Ouvertes au soleil."

The poet, in another poem has "cette idée / De planter nos mains au jardin", but for the hands to flower, "Il faudra la saison prochaine / Et nos mains fondues comme l'eau" ("Nos Mains au jardin", *Poèmes*).

Catherine's hands are described as being capable, busy — they are the external manifestations of her state of being. Michel pauses to admire them as she sews: "Quelles mains pleines de pouvoir tu as!" But once she moves into *les chambres de bois* and becomes idle, her hands are no longer rough and reddened, but "ses mains [...] devenaient blanches et ses ongles [...] s'allongeaient comme des griffes de bête captive." It is through her hands that her illness first manifests itself, "les premières, ses mains vinrent à manquer."

The most powerful image employed by Anne Hébert is that of bones:

Je suis une fille maigre
Et j'ai de beaux os.

("La Fille maigre", *Poèmes*)

This stripping to the bones, this denial of the flesh, is the striking metaphor for the *refus de la vie*; it is the ultimate *dépouillement*. Language, too, is stripped to its very bones, shorn of all excess flesh, only the clear, hard, exact word remains: the skeleton of an idea or image. Flesh betrays one. Witness how Michel succumbed to the warmth and softness of Catherine; the hard, inflexible bones of one's being are too rigid, too immobile to permit betrayal, action or emotion. But the skeleton — the bare outline of bones is the very image of death:

Alors surgit le thème des os, qui représente ce qu'on possède de plus sûr et de plus irréductible, le dernier recours de la solitude et sa dernière complaisance. La chair devait nous faire communiquer avec le monde, et elle nous a trahi. Tandis qu'avec les os on peut être tranquille, même si c'est une tranquillité [*sic*] à l'image de la mort. Le poète célèbre maintenant, non plus la solitude aux "mais ouvertes", mais

la dernière extrémité de l'isolement . . . l'existence nue, sans beauté et sans don; . . . le poète imagine des amours étranges ou la chair ne jouerait aucun rôle.¹³

To strip to the bones is the ultimate purification. Michel praises Lia's thinness to Catherine, "la maigreur de Lia qu'il comparait au pur tranchant de l'esprit." He believes that "un jour . . . elle redeviendra pure comme ses os." Catherine and Lia are set in contrast: Catherine as the warm living flesh, Lia the cold, brittle skeleton of death.

Claudine, François' mother in *Le Torrent*, constantly tells her son: "Il faut se dompter jusqu'aux os", precisely because the bones are "ce qu'on possède de plus sûr et irréductible, le dernier secours de la solitude et sa dernière complaisance."

When Anne Hébert plunges into the vitality of *Mystère de la parole*, when her vision of the world expands into a joyous affirmation and acceptance of the earth and water, when her language grows richer and more vibrant, it is as if the world were made flesh. But, as "Le Tombeau des rois" illustrates, it was necessary to "connaître l'état des os", to experience this *dépouillement* in order to emerge victoriously into the fullness of a new life.

The "fille maigre" in Anne Hébert's poem, with her thin, frail, ephemeral appearance, seems to characterize all the heroines: Catherine and Lia of this novel, Lucie in *Le Temps sauvage*, Emilie, Catherine, Stéphanie, Dominique in the short stories are all such intense and slight girls. Their childlike appearance enhances their refusal to grow up. This intimation of childish innocence and rejection of the adult world also pervades the poems of *Le Tombeau des rois*.

Catherine, when confronted by the demands of the adult world, such as marriage, retreats into childishness, "simulait le travail ou l'enfance lorsque l'un d'eux s'arrêtait pour la regarder et lui dire bonsoir." Only at the end does she develop into a woman capable of making decisions and pursuing her own well-being. Lia, on the other hand, grows thinner, retreating into the solace and hardness — or as Michel would have it — the purity of her bones.

Elizabeth, in *Kamouraska*, as she recalls her past is a plump, middle-aged woman, and this one heroine has developed from a thin, dreamy girl into a solid, desirable woman: the essence of her beauty, unlike Lia's, is in her flesh not her bones.

Thus words become symbols, form images that unite to create thematic and structural patterns in individual works as well as in the entire body of Anne Hébert's writing. And we can see that the movement of *Les Chambres de bois* as it is developed symbolically through language, theme and image is the repetition of a pattern. *Les Chambres de bois* is both a crystallization and a prophecy.

NOTES

¹ *Les Chambres de bois* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1958). All references to the novel are from this text. It follows two volumes of poetry, *Les Songes en équilibre* (1942),

and *Le Tombeau des rois* (1953), and a volume of short stories, collected under the title of *Le Torrent* (1950). It is Anne Hébert's first novel. Since then, she has brought out another volume of poetry, *Poèmes* (1960) comprised of *Le Tombeau des rois* and *Mystère de la parole*, a collection of her plays, *Le Temps sauvage* (1967), and a novel *Kamouraska* (1970). Some of her later poems are printed in René Lacôte's *Anne Hébert*, (Paris: Seghers, 1969) and have been published in various periodicals.

² Réjean Robidoux et André Renaud, *Le Roman Canadien-français du vingtième siècle* (Ottawa: Éditions de L'Université d'Ottawa, 1966) p. 174.

³ "Mystère de la parole", *Poèmes*, p. 75.

⁴ See Lacôte, pp. 151-52, 155-56, 163-64.

⁵ Pierre Pagé, *Anne Hébert* (Montréal: Fides, 1965), p. 36.

⁶ "une Petite Morte", *Poèmes*, p. 42.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁹ "La Chambre de bois", *Poèmes*, p. 42.

¹⁰ Albert Le Grand, *Anne Hébert: de l'exil au royaume*. (Montréal: Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1967), pp. 20, 27.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

¹² Pagé, *op. cit.* p. 14 quoting from Anne Hébert's script, *La Canne à pêche*, p. 1.

¹³ Gilles Marcotte, *Un Littérature qui se fait*. (Montréal: HMH, 1966), p. 291.

MONSOON

John Ditsky

one of those days when the rain
stays on, and off and on,

making the dawn stay on
as well, fooling the birds

— days when the sky pours
down Sumatra on the town:

the afternoons when old *colons*
can sip their tonics — skip

administering — let the lights
make night of outer fact;

then clocks lie Dali-limp,
the drums don't thump, and you

and I may lie (if sense
be there) in permanent siesta