

ANNE HEBERT

Story and Poem

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ANNE HÉBERT'S story, *Le Torrent*, and its relation to the rest of French-Canadian literature takes on the same significance as does the relation between an ancient House and its coat of arms. It can be argued that the story is a zenith point within the tradition to which it belongs. It is like an emblem, an heraldic legend typifying the house it comes from.

Mlle. Hébert's position in the literary history of French Canada speaks for itself. She follows after the poet Saint-Denys-Garneau and comes before the writers of *la révolution tranquille*. Any reading of her work will immediately reveal its hermetic and personal qualities. Anne Hébert belongs in a tradition of privateness established by Emile Nelligan in the late nineteenth century, taken up by Saint-Denys Garneau in the twentieth, and brought to its high point by herself. But it is exactly this kind of poetry that represents a most significant step in the development of French-Canadian literature. It represents a break with the past and an exposure to contemporary influences. In addition, a certain congruency of images and symbols in the work of these three poets makes it accessible, and renders it understandable within the whole perspective of literary history. We are not limited to interpretations of personal anguish and experience, and of an almost manichean dualism; diligent study has provided a bounty of information concerning the literary influences on these writers, and recently attempts have been made to treat their work in a highly non-subjective way.¹

*Le Torrent*² is most accessible through its superficial meaning, through its theme of conflict. It has been stated above that the story is emblematic; as such, it represents the duality that has always characterized French-Canadian literature: the division of being. The same is manifested by the use and opposition

of particular symbols. Water opposed to dryness invites life; the closed room or house opposed to the open land or water invites death. This opposition reflects the archetypal conflict between the flesh and the spirit. The lesson to be learned here is that the traditional life of the spirit is really the death of the flesh, not its mere suppression but its death: a paradox indicating the seriousness of the division of being. The persona will try to escape this division through a destruction of the traditional notion of life and an assertion of life by the physical senses, to reinstate the natural equilibrium of existence.

At once the struggle between instinct and reason becomes apparent. The struggle is engendered by a clash of orthodoxy and unorthodoxy of values. From this observation, one can proceed to an interpretation of opposition between the official collective order and the unofficial individual attempts to obliterate that order. The result is *dédoublement*, the splitting of the personality by two equally strong forces.³ The same opposition and splitting characterizes the early poetry of Anne Hébert. Her late poetry is an affirmation of freedom and new life. The dramatic action of the poetry is conveyed through uniform symbols found also in her fiction. The images and symbols can be reduced to a basic concept expressed in the author's total work; that is, to the concept of time and space and its particular relation to the poetic persona.

From her earliest poems,⁴ we observe the author's nascent vision of life and existence as a closed space containing no time but the past. Naturally, such a view leads from happy contemplation to disrupting alienation. The past of childhood becomes oppressive, and a closed existence becomes a permanent present. There follows a progressive, almost systematic, delineation of images and symbols conveying the sterile condition of a static existence: faded flowers, past memories, lost happiness, sombre dwellings, closed rooms and houses, impenetrable windows and doors, dusty furniture, ashes, mirrors, hydrophobia, claustrophobia, claustrophilia, and finally, the ultimate irreducible dark space of the coffin and tomb. The whole impact of such imagery will be vividly presented in a key poem, "Le tombeau des rois".⁵ Here, a descent into the grave of a dead past provides the only means of exiting into a present time which will turn naturally into future. The future of time is affirmed in the collection called, *Mystère de la Parole*.

In *Le Torrent*, meaning can be intensified by a more profound analysis. The central conflict in the story does not merely reflect an opposition between the Conscious and the Subconscious, the former represented by Claudine the mother, the latter by François the son and narrator, and by the action of the Torrent of

water on him.⁶ The Mother image in French-Canadian literature embodies more than a symbol for the individual Conscious. In *Le Torrent* the Mother represents a collectivity and an established order of life. Because of the importance of this figure in the literary history of French Canada and its relatively dominant position in the major portion of our literature in French, the Mother cannot perforce be a limited symbol. Indeed, if she is archetypal in Québec, all the ambiguities of such a portent must be taken into account. Claudine, therefore, is not solely François' external world but also a disruptive part of his inner world. She is part of the Self, conscious and unconscious. She represents land, duty, religion, country, culture, the past and the present. If the same mother-figure symbolizes for Emile Nelligan a protective barrier against a threatening real world, for Anne Hébert she symbolizes a protective barrier that threatens self-annihilation. And the poet is aware of this. Similarly, the image of the Garden, a place of refuge, a protective *locus amoenus*, takes on the same ambivalent characteristics. It is a haven whose dangers are hidden under a soporific guise of goodness. A mother's arms, a pleasant garden enclosure are in reality stifling because they guard against the contradictions of life's forces, or they repress any tentative action towards the full acceptance of life. The whole process resembles the contraction of a coiled insect when subjected to a sharp exterior stimulus: "J'étouffe dans un jardin/ . . . /Laissez-moi donc dormir!", exclaims the persona.⁷ We observe in this poem a skillful combination of two images, the garden and the room, which together convey an extremely strong feeling of suffocation or living-death. The garden is in this case the flowery wallpaper of the bedroom.

THE NARRATION in *Le Torrent* divides into two identifiable parts with rising and falling intensity. The action intensified by the extreme repression suffered by François, repression by his mother's will, and his own repression of the pull towards the instinctual life of the Torrent also resembles the contraction of the insect. This reaction climaxes in François' sudden deafness, the result of being struck by the mother, and in the sudden importance of the dominating Torrent:⁸

. . . I had become deaf.

From that day on, a fissure opened in my oppressed life. The heavy silence of deafness overcame me, and a proneness to dreams, a kind of companionship, invaded my existence. No voice, no noise from the exterior touched me any more.

No more the crash of the nearby falls, no more the song of the cricket. I was certain of this. Yet I heard the Torrent existing within me, and with it, our house and the whole of our land. I did not possess the world, but this one thing had changed: a part of the world possessed me. The land with its water, mountains and deep caves held me in its mighty grip.⁹

Once the narrator is drawn into the world of nature, he experiences a whirlpool of sensations and feelings. Though the Torrent represents a physical symbol of repressed existence, it also becomes the image of the narrator's actual condition: turbulency, loss of direction, loss of power, absence of will, full domination by external natural forces. Furthermore, the narrator's inability to control his new condition, constitutes a falling action. He recognizes his condition but cannot direct it away from what seems to be a fatal course. Like the horse, Perceval, unable to be broken by the mother, François desires escape from her cruel attempts to break his ego. Because of his deafness, and because of the Torrent's hold over him, François begins truly to experience the duality of his existence and the conflict between life in nature and death by reason; whereas in the first half of the narrative all he knew was the absolute control of his mother's will, now he suddenly finds himself open to himself, unprotected and exposed to a more intense struggle.

IN THE COLLECTION of poems, *Le Tombeau Des Rois*, there is a progression of images that perfectly describes the poetic journey undertaken by the persona and the dark journey undertaken by François. It proceeds from water and fluid images to more solid imagery, from these through the familiar images of closed rooms and houses to the final tomb image. A sampling of titles is enough to prove this: "Eveil au seuil d'une fontaine", "Sous la pluie", "Les grandes fontaines", "Les pêcheurs d'eau", "Les mains", "Nuit", "La voix de l'oiseau", "Les petites villes", "La fille maigre", "La chambre fermée", "La chambre de bois", "Nos mains au jardin", "Vie de château", "Le tombeau des rois". Each step of the way to the end has its appropriate victim. In the first poem the victim is a sleepy persona who is ignorant of the water's dangerous enchantment. *Les grandes fontaines* are found deep in a forest. Only fear prevents one from going to them, fear of what the water may reflect, fear of its power to steal the body out of its protective dream-world. A bird is caught by *les pêcheurs d'eau*. The persona glimpses an inverted image of a garden in the

water, caught there as if in a watery net. Hands are the subject of the very next poem. They are washed in colour; they become a pitiable offering or gesture under the sun's rays. *Nuit* becomes the dark waters of engulfment. In this darkness, the heart becomes a blinking searchlight sending out an unrecognizable signal. But every time the light hits the eyes, the eyes close like the contracting insect, preferring the safety of nighttime. A dead bird's voice ("La voix d'un oiseau") in an unknown wood replaces the undecipherable code. The wood is a black isle, it is captivity: "De mois à l'oiseau/ . . . /Nul passage/Nul secours" (p. 25). *Les petites villes* are those of the past, of childhood, containing lifeless parks and gardens. Barren of wind and water, these enclosures are like museums, their amusements lined up in rows. They engender a condition of living-death. The body in "La fille maigre" is reduced to its smallest living dimension, a skeleton. The flaying of the Self not only suggests a ritualized aggression, but, as in the poem by Saint-Denys Garneau ("Cage d'oiseau"), it represents the final stage of alienation, the balance between living-death and real death.

Then follow the closed and wooden rooms that imprison the body as well as the spirit. The rooms represent the historical past and the reaches of sterility. Their wood is ancient, permeated with fatal odours. These images of imprisonment and suffocation are enlarged and given a more explicit meaning. Existence in the ancestral manor is characterized by its qualities of absence of objects and people that would make it livable otherwise. Only the persona inhabits this place, a hall of mirrors. The split of the Self is symbolized by reflection in the polished glass. The Original and its Double contemplate each other, narcissistically, in the glass waters. The Double retains his traditional idiosyncrasies, he is Death announcing death. He resides under the quicksilver of the mirror. Being an exact copy of the Original, he sticks to his victim; like seaweed, says the poet. Together, they simulate an act of love, a perversion of love.

The result of division by conflicting forces is alienation of the Self. In the story, before the horse's escape and the mother's death, François had only experienced denial and absence; denial of love, childhood and any physical life; absence of other humans. His completely isolated and guarded existence is symbolized by the confines of a daily routine of chores and prayers, by maternal decree, and by the figurative significance of the house. He is thoroughly dispossessed. At the seminary where he is sent to learn self-denial and holiness, he learns only loneliness and fear. He keeps away from his fellow students because he cannot know them. They are the outside, the temptations of evil, of life beyond the eternal vigilance of the self. Thus, his isolation is final.

Alienation, therefore, is the movement inwards away from exterior existence into the very narrow keep of repression. Extreme denial of anything connected with real life produces a condition that must lead to actual death, for the grave or coffin is its ultimate symbol. The splitting of the personality on the surface takes the form of loneliness or solitude. Underneath this isolation, the Self undergoes successive change induced by the storm and stress of surface conditions, causing the persona to experience desperate need for contact of any kind with any other human. Frustration of these needs causes increased division of the Ego. Finally, the desperation of such an irreparable state produces complete confusion, total exposure to the dividing forces, final collapse of rational existence. The extent of this alienation begins to unwind in the second part of *Le Torrent*, at the narrator's fascination with the horse, Perceval, ending with the last paragraph of the story. The attempt to escape such existence, which constitutes the action of the second half, is the first made in the work of Anne Hébert.

The mother dead, he is left to himself. Gradually, as he perceives the static condition of his sterile life, he feels the effects of utter solitude and isolation, and then of alienation. His life is referred to as pointless in time and space, without centre. The feelings of absolute loneliness are intensified by despair. It is too late to recapture life. The moment this is perceived is a moment of revelation, for the narrator knows then that he must follow events to their end. His previous subjection to the Torrent had left him without direction. The events he must follow are a surge of activity that bring François to experience a nightmarish recognition of his utter desolation. He must endure a series of irreversible experiences. He becomes tormented by desire for woman, and goes out to find her. Each impulse to act, to counter passivity, is met by a painful reminder of his split existence, something which in itself prevents positive action. In order to find a woman, he must confront and admit to his solitude. Doing so, he bears witness to his alienation.

The girl he brings home, Amica, in many ways resembles the horse Perceval: in spirit, in mystery, and in appearance, with blue-black hair like the blue-black skin and mane of his stallion. She is the unknown, the purity of physical and instinctual life. But François can only suffer from his encounter with her:

I observe the alien couple during its wedding night.
I am the wedding guest.

This splitting into actor and spectator, not only forms the premise for the narration; it also occurred as such at the exact moment when François is struck

deaf by Claudine. The splitting results from an ever-present conflict, for the mother prolongs her domination over the narrator right up to the end. Being dead, she truly becomes the symbol of the devastation wreaked by the order she symbolizes. Such destruction pushes François to the very limits of his existence. The necessity voiced by the Torrent in his pounding temples invites him to a final and complete discovery of the unknown.

The prospect of being found out by the girl, of being destroyed by her presence and the demands it makes upon him, drive François mad with fever and delirium. She represents possible destruction or invasion, not simply because she may discover the secret concerning her mother's death, but because she has invaded all possibilities of concealment that François previously enjoyed; she has opened up all the closed spaces of his external and internal life. She has penetrated all the locked rooms of the house and stripped him of his last private refuge, robbed him of submergence into the deepest part of himself. Once she is gone, there remains only one thing to confront: complete and absolute solitude, final and irrevocable alienation. As if to confirm this, the narrator announces:

Who will teach me the way out? I am alone, alone inside of myself.

To escape the pain of his conscious existence, François must push away its constricting effects, must attempt the final "adventure" of life:

I bend over as far as I can. I want to see the whirling abyss from as close as possible. I want to lose myself in this adventure. My one and only appalling possession.

The story ends with an attempt to reclaim life in its fully ambivalent state. It is also escape into the unknown, the last potential means of becoming one with the rush of the Torrent and all it represents.

In the poem, "Le tombeau des rois", a similar journey or adventure can be observed, a similar escape into an unknown future. The descent into the tomb is a Thesian voyage through the labyrinth of the mind, or of the soul and body. The reduction of the closed spaces of the persona's existence is contained in the image of the grave. The grave as the dimension of death is absolute. It is both breathless and fathomless, like the gulf or the abyss; it is an unescapable enclosure. This image is used to project the conditions of living-death. The nature of actual death can only be induced or imagined, as François imagines it to be "mon aventure, ma seule et épouvantable richesse". Anne Hébert's persona in-

duces the nature of actual death from the particulars of her experience throughout the progression of poems in *Les Songes en Equilibre* (1942) and *Le Tombeau des Rois* (1953). In this title poem of the second collection, actual death becomes identified with dead kings, and the experience of it is recreated in the rape of the persona, seven times by seven tall Pharaohs. After a symbolic real death, the persona is freed from its living-death and moves towards the dawn at the end of the long tunnel of the tomb.

THE JOURNEY THROUGH THE DARKNESS begins with the persona carrying her heart on a fist, bearing it like a lamp to light the way. Within the tomb lie the remains of all that was human, the remains of past mythologies and civilisations, and a vestigial attraction for the gems and bones of a dead existence. The heart is a sightless bird that breathes and trembles strangely whenever the attraction becomes too dangerous. In the bony embrace of the kings, a dry hand searches for the heart to break it. In the end, the rites of death having passed, the dream finishes, a reawakening occurs:

Livid and satiated with the horrible dream
 My limbs freed
 And the dead thrust out of me, assassinated,
 What glimmer of dawn strays in here?
 Wherefore does this bird quiver
 And turn toward morning
 Its blinded eyes?¹⁰

Liberation of the Self depends on confrontation with death. To be initiated into life, one must die, literally or symbolically, in order to be reanimated. François' end allows him to experience the unknown, and therefore his new adventure could possibly be a new beginning. The persona of the poem is released into the light once more, and her affirmation of life unfolds in *Mystère de la Parole* where every word, act or gesture is a fiat. The title poem vividly asserts that the word can be made flesh. The word-maker lives by naming things. The poetic consecration of life is thus a creative process:

Que celui qui a reçu fonction de la parole vous prenne
 en charge comme un coeur ténébreux de surcroit, et
 n'ait de cesse que soient justifiés les vivants et les morts
 en un seul chant parmi l'aube et les herbes.¹¹

All the closed spaces of the Self are opened up by the destruction of the symbols of isolation and solitude. Poem titles again convey the feeling of transformation: "Naissance du pain", "Alchimie du jour", "Je suis la terre et l'eau", "Printemps sur la ville", "La ville tuée", "Annonciation", "Eve", "Des dieux captifs". Symbols and images previously given a negative and morbid function now metamorphose into positive and vivid meanings. Snow, birds, water, landscape no longer convey a perverse condition of alienation; they are shorn of their previous uniformity. Instead of a blanket of death, snow becomes a natural element complete with all its ambivalent characteristics. It is negative when it tempts one into a prison of dreams and sterile purity, positive when it is made a natural compliment to existence. Birds fly free. Water flows as blood flows. Landscape is divested of any static qualities. Time is freed and allowed to fill the immensities of space.

The idea and image of the Torrent form the symbolic foundation of François' narration, just as the idea and image of the tomb form the symbolic foundation of the collection and its title poem, "Le Tombeau des Rois". In both cases, the fundamental component has a distinctly ambivalent quality; it evinces negative and positive characteristics at the same time. Ambivalence constitutes the necessary element in the drama of Anne Hébert's total work. Without attraction there can be no repulsion, and the poetic drama is animated by such a process. The Torrent is an aggregate of opposites, destructive and creative. The Tomb as an aggregate symbol represents the logical end of a progression marked by opposition. All the images and metaphors of preceding poems are resolved by the final descent underground. The light of day at the end of the descent into the tomb provides an indication of a non-destructive resolution. It leads literally into the mysteries of creation. We can conclude that the duality of existence cannot be resolved, but that the persona can accept its dialectic and use it creatively. The Self will then cease to be split by physical and metaphysical forces. What takes place in Anne Hébert's last poems is the exploration of the mystery of new life, and the wonderment and affirmation of anything and everything.

There is this final comment to be made on the implication of *Le Torrent* for French-Canadian literature. In Anne Hébert's story, the characters and events are the parts of a collective consciousness: Claudine is *la femme canadienne*, an enduring but perverted Maria Chapdelaine; François represents the effected offspring of the former, the depersonalized male, empty ownership, the disjointed Self, the disinherited heir seeking reintegration with his surroundings; Perceval and Amica are personifications of the land, of natural life. Together, these

characters and symbols form the dramatic opposition that constitutes the central activity of the French-Canadian, and indeed the Canadian, literary tradition.

NOTES

- ¹ See Gilles Houde's study in *La Barre du Jour*, and papers given at the conference, *Poet and Critic*, November 1969 at the University of Alberta, Edmonton. See note 6.
- ² Anne Hébert, *Le Torrent* (Montréal, 1963). The story was written in 1945. This edition also contains other short stories by the author.
- ³ See Albert Le Grand, "Ann Hébert: de l'exil au royaume", *Etudes Françaises*, 4, 1 (1968), complete article.
- ⁴ *Les Songes en équilibre* (Montréal, 1942).
- ⁵ In *Poèmes* (Paris, 1960). This collection contains two collections, *Le Tombeau des Rois* (1953) and *Mystère de la Parole* (1960).
- ⁶ Gilles Houde, "Les symboles et la structure mythique de Torrent", *La Barre du Jour*, no. 16 and 21.
- ⁷ *Les Songes en équilibre*, p. 69.
- ⁸ *Le Torrent*, p. 29.
- ⁹ My translation.
- ¹⁰ Anne Hébert, "The Tomb of Kings", trans. by F. R. Scott, *Saint-Denys Garneau: Anne Hébert, translations/traductions* (Vancouver, 1962), p. 47.
- ¹¹ *Mystère de la Parole*, title poem, p. 75.

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