

THE AGONIZING SOLITUDE

*The Poetry of
Anne Hébert*

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THE WRITING OF Anne Hébert records an intense interior drama of poetic and spiritual evolution, though in volume her poetic output has been quite small: *Les Songes en Equilibre* (1942), *Le Tombeau des Rois* (1953) and *Poèmes* (1960).

Miss Hébert's first volume of poetry, *Les Songes en Equilibre*, reveals to us a young girl in the first stages of physical, artistic and spiritual evolution. The style likewise is as yet unformed; on the whole it is thin and frail, but occasionally it gives a foretaste of the clearcut, unadorned style of Miss Hébert's more mature poetry.

The girl evoked in the pages of *Les Songes en Equilibre* is one who, like Saint-Denys-Garneau, deeply loves the natural joys of life, but who, like him, feels that her salvation and her inspiration lie in renouncing these joys and embracing the anguish of solitude. She has been capable of suspending herself in the present moment, of experiencing a joy not overcast by the awareness of eternity, a joy in

Un enfant
Qui chante,
Un homme qui passe;
Tout le tendre
Et doux matin . . .
Cette grâce
Posée
Dans l'instant. (“Instant”)

With the stirrings of maturity, however, comes the realization of poetic and spiritual duty. She wonders at her audacity in believing that the things of the

world existed to amuse her; suddenly natural joys fade at the arrival of a calm figure which usurps their place:

C'est mon cœur triste
Qui prend toute la place,
En premier plan.
Toute la féerie
Devenue figurante
A l'air triste aussi,
Derrière mon cœur. ("Le Miroir")

Still, however, she has enough of the child in her to rebel at the frightening prospect of maturity:

Délivrez mon âme
Des paysages lunaires
Que le soleil n'atteint plus! ("Terre")

In a series of unequal poems Miss Hébert traces the gradual growth within her of the sorrow of the adult, the poet, and the saint:

Que ne puis-je la faire sortir!
Mais qui remplirait
Alors de vide de sa présence
Dedans moi?
Le plaisir y serait mal à l'aise,
Et moi aussi avec lui
Depuis le temps qu'on se connaît
Ma douleur et moi . . . ("Minuit")

At this stage at least, the spiritual and poetic development of the poet are parallel. The final departure of the fairies of childhood is painted vividly in a poem entitled "Mort":

Une à une
A la file,
Mes fées
M'ont quittée,
Et je suis restée seule
Avec un grand Christ
Entre les bras.

The evocation of the spiritual in such concrete terms comes as a shock to the reader, who has been prepared for it, if at all, only in the most veiled of allusions.

But from this point on in *Les Songes en Equilibre*, spirituality assumes a role of prime importance in the poetry. The poetic mission is seen as a *spiritual* mission, and the poet prays to become as a pencil in the hand of God:

Mon Dieu, j'ai peur,
 J'ai peur d'écrire . . .
 Guidez ma main,
 Soyez la main elle-même,
 Moi, je veux bien être le crayon. (“Communion”)

Certain key images are employed in *Les Songes en Equilibre*, images which will become symbols of profound meaning in *Le Tombeau des Rois*. In one of the earliest poems, “Les Deux Mains”, Miss Hébert introduces the image of the outstretched hands, representing self-oblation. At this stage of her development, the giving of self is incomplete and only one hand is extended:

Ces deux mains qu'on a . . .
 Celle qu'on donne
 Et celle qu'on garde . . .
 Cette main d'enfant,
 Cette main de femme . . .
 Ah! qui me rendra
 Mes deux mains unies? (“Les Deux Mains”)

The tree image, so prominent yet so obscure in *Le Tombeau des Rois*, is clarified by *Les Songes en Equilibre*, and takes on a spiritual connotation by being identified with the cross:

Il me faut apprendre
 Toute la Croix,
 Pied à pied, pouce à pouce;
 Y grimper
 Comme à un arbre difficile. (“Devant le Crucifix”)

The last poem of the volume, “L'Oiseau du Poète”, introduces the bird symbol of the later volume. The bird is the poet, as well as the poem produced:

Alors le ciel n'a pas été assez grand
 Pour le premier vol
 De cet oiseau triomphant,
 Sorti de l'argile et du mystère
 D'un poète en état de grâce.

The choice of this last line to close the volume is ample indication of Miss

Hébert's identification of the poetic and spiritual vocation at the time of *Les Songes en Equilibre*.

A READER OF *Les Songes en Equilibre* who opens *Le Tombeau des Rois* interested to see the fruits of the intervening eleven years will probably notice first of all a radical tightening of style. In his introduction to the volume, Pierre Emmanuel describes it thus:

Un verbe austère et sec, rompu, soigneusement exclu de la musique; des poèmes comme tracés dans l'os par la pointe d'un poignard . . . Aucun adjectif, aucune image flamboyante ou simplement ornementale, aucune arabesque sonore, aucun développement lyrique, aucun thème intellectuel: partout la discontinuité apparente d'un symbolisme épars.

Les Songes en Equilibre has traced the path of the poet into solitude; the poems of *Le Tombeau des Rois* are songs of this solitude — its sweet sadness and its unbearable anguish.

Anne Hébert's isolation is invariably likened to that of Saint-Denys-Garneau. There is, however, a basic difference. Their development can be paralleled up to a certain point: both delight in the joys of the world but are drawn to reject them and enter into the suffering of solitude. Both are attracted to mystical experience, which is attained only by the denial of all that we commonly call experience. And it is at this point that their paths diverge.

It seems to me that there is here a basic problem to be treated — that of the relationship of mysticism and art. Certainly there can be no real dichotomy between the two, for both aspire to union with the Absolute Good. But there is an important difference, in that the mystic reaches a point where his experience becomes incommunicable; only union with God matters. For the artist, however, the need to communicate his experience to men never ceases to be a driving force; if he isolates himself completely he finds the springs of inspiration drying up. Saint-Denys-Garneau's mystical experience progressed up to the point where he no longer felt the need or possessed the ability to communicate it. That is why it was necessary for him to cease writing: he had made his choice between mysticism and art.

Anne Hébert in *Le Tombeau des Rois* portrays the agonizing experience of the artist who must live in solitude in order to comprehend fully her vision of reality, and who in her isolation from the world suffers artistic dryness. In the first poem the poet visualizes the solitude she is entering as a calm, clear body of water stretching before her, concealing she knows not what:

Sur l'eau égale
S'étend
La surface plane
Pure à perte de vue
D'une eau inconnue. (“Eveil au Seuil d'une Fontaine”)

The second poem, “Sous la Pluie”, communicates the peace and protection of solitude; but already in the third poem we detect traces of a nascent bitterness at the drying up of poetic inspiration — the days and the trees around this fountain of solitude form no reflection in its clear surface. Still, however, the poet's isolation is a “consecrated marine vocation”, and her interior tears are accompanied by patience.

In this context, the obscure symbolism of “Les Pêcheurs d'Eau” takes on a profound significance. The fishermen (Christ, religion, spirituality) have caught the bird who is poetry in their nets. The tree still resounds with connotations of the cross from the preceding volume, and the striking image of the woman at the foot of the tree now becomes clear:

Cette femme qui coud
Au pied de l'arbre
Sous le coup de midi

Cette femme assise
Refait, point à point,
L'humilité du monde,
Rien qu'avec la douce patience
De ses deux mains brûlées.

The recurring image of the outstretched hands representing the giving of self is a pivotal one at this stage of Miss Hébert's development:

Elle ne les referme jamais
Et les tend toujours . . .
D'elle pour nous
Nul lieu d'accueil et d'amour

Sans cette offrande impitoyable
Des mains de douleurs parées
Ouvertes au soleil. ("Les Mains")

The poet, then, has felt called to isolation, and while realizing it is a vocation of sorrow, has embraced it as her mission. From the beginning, however, there are indications that her salvation lies not purely in the mystical but in the artistic sphere. She does not seek her inspiration in spiritual experience as did John of the Cross; nor does she cease to attempt communication, as did Saint-Denys-Garneau. Instead she seeks to perpetuate her inspiration by recalling memories of her childhood (or the period she spent in communication with the world). As these memories gradually fade, she begins to despair.

Her despair at first is only a "*petit désespoir*" — more accurately, it is a feeling of profound sorrow. It is not despair, for the poet, while she can no longer rejoice in the pleasures of the moment:

Mon cœur est rompu
L'instant ne le porte plus, ("Petit Désespoir")

still has an awareness of the *purpose* in her sorrow. She can still feel the consolation that comes from giving herself and therefore she desires the darkness of her solitude to continue:

A chaque éclat de lumière
Je ferme les yeux
Pour la continuité de la nuit
La perpétuité du silence
Où je sombre. ("Nuit")

The poems that follow this one portray an ever increasing torment. Isolation becomes stifling, and a new symbol is introduced, one that will be vital to Anne Hébert's thought — the closed chamber. The poet is surrounded by a wall, which she could jump over or remove without effort, except that she feels imprisoned by her own fidelity to her present state:

Un mur à peine
Un signe de mur
Posé en couronne
Autour de moi.
Je pourrais bouger,
Sauter la haie de rosiers, . . .

Seule ma fidélité me lie
 O liens durs
 Que j'ai noués
 En je ne sais quelle nuit secrète
 Avec la mort! ("Un Mur à Peine")

Someone has led her to this closed room where she sits with arms outstretched in the form of a cross ("La Chambre fermée"), and she will be capable of surviving there as long as she can retain the memories of her childhood and of the world outside ("La Chambre de Bois"). Miss Hébert occasionally achieves heights of startling power in describing the agony of her state:

Midi brûle aux carreaux d'argent
 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.
 ("La Chambre de Bois")

The atmosphere in the closed rooms becomes less and less bearable in each successive poem until we reach "Nos Mains au Jardin". Again Miss Hébert has used the hands symbol to mark a significant stage in her evolution. The poet conceives the idea of planting her hands in the garden, in the hope that they will produce fruit. However after waiting a whole day and seeing no results she realizes that

Pour une seule fleur
 Une seule minuscule étoile de couleur
 Un seul vol d'aile calme
 Pour une seule note pure
 Répétée trois fois

 Il faudra la saison prochaine
 Et nos mains fondues comme l'eau.

Here again a poem of obscure symbolism is clarified by referring it to the symbolism of Christianity. Is this not a poetic echo of John XII.24?

Believe me when I tell you this: a grain of wheat must fall into the ground and die, or else it remains nothing more than a grain of wheat; but if it dies, then it yields rich fruit.

A period of self-annihilation, of spiritual and poetic dryness, a dark night of the soul, is necessary before any fruit can be produced. And this period is what the poet now enters into, and what she calls "*l'envers du monde*". Now there is real dryness — the imagery becomes that of salt, of blindness and groping, of death in life:

Il y a certainement quelqu'un
Qui m'a tuée
Puis s'en est allé . . .
A oublié d'effacer la beauté du monde
Autour de moi
A oublié de fermer mes yeux avides
Et permis leur passion perdue. ("Il y a certainement quelqu'un")

The poem entitled "L'Envers du Monde" is a powerful cry of pain from the abyss in which the poet is foundering. She recalls the early consolations of her solitude:

Hier
Nous avons mangé les plus tendres feuilles du sommeil
Les songes nous ont couchées
Au sommet de l'arbre de nuit

However, the consolations do not last:

Notre fatigue n'a pas dormi . . .

and the only hope of survival now for the poet is in drawing inspiration from memory:

La voix de l'oiseau
Hors de son cœur et de ses ailes rangées ailleurs
Cherche éperdument la porte de la mémoire
Pour vivre encore un petit souffle de temps.

The combined spiritual and poetic dark night is evoked by the combination of spiritual and poetic symbols in the phrase "*arbre de parole*":

Aucun arbre de parole n'y pousse ses racines silencieuses
Au cœur noir de la nuit.
C'est ici l'envers du monde
Qui donc nous a chassées de ce côté?

The depths of despair are reached in "Paysage", where love and giving have completely dried up, the memory of childhood has become meaningless, and the cry of the bird once so vitally alive now seems only imaginary:

L'amour changé en sel
Et les mains à jamais perdues.

Sur les deux rives fume mon enfance
Sable et marais mémoire fade
Que hante le cri rauque
D'oiseaux imaginaires châtiés par le vent.

"Un Bruit de Soie", the last poem in the section entitled *L'Envers du Monde*, is dominated by an image of the merciless heat and blinding light of noon which is reminiscent of Camus' *L'Etranger*. The poet is groping blindly, arms outstretched, unable to see the person for whom she is searching because the sun is so bright. The closing lines of the poem reveal that the dark night has ended — the shadow of the tree-cross at last brings merciful relief, and the poet, now able to see, realizes that her hands have produced fruit:

Mes mains écartent le jour comme un rideau
L'ombre d'un seul arbre étale la nuit à nos pieds
Et découvre cette calme immobile distance
Entre tes doigts de sable et mes paumes toutes fleuries.

The final poem in the volume, "Le Tombeau des Rois", sums up metaphorically the whole course of experience traced in the book, as a horrible but fruitful dream of patient tragedy and self-oblation. The poet on waking has freed herself, has cast out of her the dead who have had possession of her. The blind bird, having recovered his sight, looks hopefully toward the dawn:

Livide et repue de songe horrible
Les membres dénoués
Et les morts hors de moi, assassinés,
Quel reflet d'aube s'é gare ici?
D'où vient donc que cet oiseau frémit
Et tourne vers le matin
Ses prunelles crevées?

LATE IN 1960 Anne Hébert published her *Poèmes*, which contains the whole of *Le Tombeau des Rois* plus a collection of new poems, most of which appeared in periodicals between 1953 and 1960. In the preface to these

later poems, Miss Hébert describes the function of poetry as a breaking of solitude. This provides a clue to the difference between *Le Tombeau des Rois* and the poems that follow it. The period of solitude necessary for poetic and spiritual formation has been broken by the act of poetic creation, and now the poet is united in a real way with all men.

Thus the main difference between the poems of *Le Tombeau des Rois* and the later poems is that the latter are written on a much broader scale. They express not only the anguish of the poet but that of entire cities and countries. In the later poems Miss Hébert participates in French-Canadian literature's growing revolt against long-standing restriction.

In "La Ville tuée" she evokes a city stifling under authority. The bird of poetry is held captive, and all emotion, passion and imagination are banished, and replaced by dogma and morality:

On étança le marais, l'oiseau de proie fut capturé, toutes ailes
déployées, le plus doux d'entre nous assura qu'il le ferait dormir en
croix sur la porte . . .

However, poetry not only breaks solitude but brings joy, and the liberation promised in the closing lines of *Le Tombeau des Rois* has proved a reality. The oppressed refuse to submit to the stagnation imposed on them. Their tunic of unhappiness becomes so tight that overnight it splits from top to bottom, and they awaken naked and alone, exposed to the beauty of the day ("Trop à l'Étroit").

The images in these poems are those of the earlier volumes — the bird, the salt, the brilliant sunlight and dark night, the sea, the closed room, the house and the doorstep — but all appear in new and significant contexts, singing of boldness and hope and a new joy:

Voici que la saison des eaux se retire; la ville se sèche comme une
grève, lèche ses malheurs au goût d'iode

Le printemps brûle le long des façades grises, et les lèpres de pierre
au soleil ont l'éclat splendide des dieux pelés et victorieux.
(“Printemps sur la Ville”)

This triumphant liberation in thought brings a change in style. Gone is the short clipped line of hard anguish; lines are long, flowing, confident. Colours interplay boldly and vividly. All the senses of the reader are brought into play, and disparate elements are juxtaposed in violent and startling image:

O toi qui trembles dans le vent, ayant hissé la beauté de ton visage
au mât des quatre saisons . . . ("Alchimie du Jour")

La joie se mit à crier, jeune accouchée à l'odeur sauvagine sous les
joncs . . . ("Mystère de la Parole")

In these poems, poetic and spiritual experience are still as closely related as in *Les Songes en Equilibre* and *Le Tombeau des Rois*. Now Miss Hébert, like Claudel, sees the poet as spokesman between men and God. To the poets of the ages, intensely loving and sensitive, has been entrusted the "passion of the world". Theirs is a Christlike mission, working with Him toward the world's redemption:

Ah nous sommes vivants, et le jour recommence à l'horizon! Dieu
peut naître à son tour, enfant blême, au bord des saisons mis en
croix; notre œuvre est déjà levée, colorée et poignante d'odeur!
("Naissance du Pain")

The poets speak for the multitude of men who experience the joys and sorrows of created beings, but cannot express them:

Fronts bouclés où croupit le silence en toisons musquées, toutes
grimaces, vieilles têtes, joues d'enfants, amours, rides, joies, deuils,
créatures, créatures, langues de feu au solstice de la terre

O mes frères les plus noirs, toutes fêtes gravées en secret; poitrines
humaines, calebasses musiciennes où s'exaspèrent des voix captives

Que celui qui a reçu fonction de la parole vous prenne en charge
comme un cœur 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

("Mystère de la Parole")

The three volumes of Anne Hébert's poems, then, record her evolution from carefree childhood through an agonizing solitude of poetic and spiritual formation to a freedom in which she embraces her French-Canadian people and all humanity — a triumphant development of thought through poetry.